

Removing Barriers of Economy: Technology and Academics

Project Category

Programmatic, Multi-disciplinary and/or Multi-campus Teaching Improvement

Abstract: This project presents the framework to establish a trial program for laptop lending within the Graduate College of Education (GCE) at The University of Massachusetts Boston. With a start up inventory of 10 laptops, the investigators propose to provide Early Childhood Educators (ECE), particularly paraprofessionals, with the opportunity to enroll in GCE's online ECE courses. Additionally, we will provide technological and academic to support their success.

Amount Requested: \$12,200

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Problem Statement

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the demand for Early Childhood Educators will rise by 26 percent between 2006 and 2016 (2008), as will the educational requirements in this field in part to NCLB (NEA, 2005). Recently, the Massachusetts Board of Education Student Financial Assistance acknowledged this shortage by adding the “Paraprofessional Teacher Education Grant” designed to encourage paraprofessionals to move into teaching positions. In fact, the current pool of paraprofessionals and home day care providers are a recognized source for recruiting new teachers. Because they already work in the field and understand its realities, they are unlikely to contribute to the usual high attrition rates for beginning teachers, 40 to 50 percent of whom leave the field within the first five years (Ingersoll, 2003).

What makes recruiting from the paraprofessional population especially appropriate to UMB’s urban mission, however, lies in their specific demographics. In the Early Childhood (EC) community paraprofessionals have traditionally been a doorway into the pre-K classroom which required very little experience or background, which frequently meant female, minority, and/or immigrant educators. In fact, until 2002, schools often hired paraprofessionals with no more than a G.E.D.; however, when NCLB became effective, standards changed. Despite these changes, two things continue to divide teachers and paraprofessionals—education and paycheck. And, as is generally the case, the two are intrinsically connected. For example, Boston Public School EC teachers (with a Bachelor’s Degree), earn a minimum of \$43/K in their first year, while paraprofessionals (who often possess an Associates’ Degree), earn only \$31/K (Boston Teachers Union, nd).

Currently, UMass Boston has positioned itself to address this growing demand, establishing an Early Childhood Educator Program within the (GCE) and obtaining substantial external funding through Boston Ready (ICI), Including All Children (GCE) and Building Careers (CPCS). These grants have already begun to address the need for Early Childhood Teachers and Paraprofessionals in the Boston Public Schools by providing free credit courses and professional development workshops. Unfortunately, the online and/or hybrid nature of these courses has revealed new obstacles, such as students who own outdated computers or who have only limited access to a computer at work, in a library or in a friend's home. Clearly this is a disadvantage to our students, especially the paraprofessionals, many of whom can least afford to buy a computer. Since last summer alone, we have had at least three students (*that we are aware of*) who dropped out of classes because of computer inadequacies; and we have no way of knowing how many others might not even have signed up for courses due computer inadequacies.

Consequently, despite the intended convenience of GCE's EC online and hybrid courses some students cannot participate in them. Further complicating these students' efforts to improve their educational and economic situations, many of our students are English Language Learners (ELL) and/or have completed their higher education in a language other than English. Ironically, the very first language skills that are an asset when working with children who are ELL, can be an obstacle to their own professional advancement.

Goals, Objectives, Outcomes

Our main goal in this project would be to "level the playing field" in terms of access to college courses and ease of access through the use of computer lending,

technology support and academic skill building. To achieve this equity, we will provide laptop computers to Early Childhood Education (ECE) students who currently have either *no access or limited access and* who demonstrate a financial need. Providing these tools will allow the former group to participate in classes they would otherwise not have access to, *and* the latter will be able to participate more fully due to their improved access. Furthermore, improved access to technology will facilitate immediate and interactive opportunities for feedback on writing assignments, thereby leading to improved student performance (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Project Support of Category Goals & University Objectives

The goals and objectives of our project support both the goals of the Programmatic Multidisciplinary, and/or Multicampus Teaching Improvement and the objectives of UMB, by coordinating the efforts of ICI, GCE, English/CIT and IT to develop a program benefiting urban educators of predominantly minority and/or immigrant backgrounds. Furthermore, the developed model from this project could later be used to expand computer lending to larger populations within our university, a task already tackled by many other universities and colleges around the country. In fact, Bridgewater, Framingham, and Worcester State have already implemented computer programs for their students (*Christian Science Monitor*, 2004).

Methods

In consultation with Financial Aid regarding standard qualifying procedures, we will determine which students present the greatest need during each of three terms: Summer '08, Fall '08, and Spring '09. In addition to the students in the group borrowing computers, we will examine the use of technology with an entire online class during each

term. These students may overlap with some of the students in the first group, but we are also examining the role of academic support within online courses. Both of these subsets of EC students will receive support throughout the term, based upon an initial writing sample taken at the beginning of the class. A third subset, Non-Participating Students, will receive only standard support services.

Project PIs will use a supportive and instructive method for commenting on all student work, which will be based primarily on a model of dialogue and feedback. Academic skills will be supported through assignments and via one on one consultation designed to provide explicit guidance that develops academic literacy needed for independence as university students.

Goal Assessment

Data for each of three student subsets (see Methods section) will be gathered and evaluated to establish improvement through: beginning and ending writing samples, amount of time spent receiving academic support, computer lending and retention rates. Computer lending results will be evaluated by comparing academic performance and improvements and by tracking the number of applicants to the program to establish the possible need for replication of the project.

Future Funding

Curriculum and Instruction has agreed to include extended funding for computer lending in their FIPSE application next year. Alternately, or through various programs specifically supporting minorities, ELL, and adult literacy such as the Boston Adult Literacy Fund.

Project Deliverables and Time Table

Spring 2008	Establish procedures and forms for lending; place online; fine tune workshop for online learning; begin taking baseline statistics, including gathering and analysis of pilot qualitative data on student writing
Summer 2008	Acquire computers; screen and select initial applicants; begin workshops
Fall 2008	Begin lending plan; expand research to three subsets
Spring 2008	Continue lending plan using “lessons learned” from Fall term Final deliverables would include a tested laptop loan process that includes: selection of high-need students, agreements between IT and academic program regarding support and training, training materials and formats that have proven successful for naïve technology users

Budget

10 Dell Laptop Computers	\$11,000
Summer Stipend P. Paugh – Summer’08	1,000
Supplies	200
TOTAL	\$12,200

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