

# *re*VISION

## **Action Grant**

(redacted excerpt of grant narrative)

## Section 1: Application Overview

The proposed **Early Childhood Project** is an innovative approach to engaging new and diverse students while strengthening the pipeline of qualified workers to much-needed early childhood education and career opportunities in Nebraska. The College proposes a project designed to better prepare students for postsecondary educational pursuits while filling a critical void in Nebraska's workforce. The College's existing CDA programming, all of which is offered asynchronously online, will be upgraded with more dynamic and interactive content that will equip students with essential subject-matter knowledge and workplace competencies. The College's Early Education webpages feature Spanish-language content – a marketing effort unique among The College's programs – that enables greater outreach. Adding a standalone Spanish-speaking version of existing and future CDA programs will help reach a demographic that is growing in Nebraska, yet underrepresented in the early childhood workforce. A bilingual Early Childhood Coordinator will be hired with grant funding to oversee all proposed initiatives.

The College will enhance its existing partnerships with local high schools and districts, non-profits, the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE), the National Child Development Association, and four-year colleges to align programming pathways with national educational requirements and career competencies. Enrolling more high school students in CDA programs, which results in 17-19 college credits at completion, will help them get a head start in the high-demand, early childhood education and workforce pipeline. Students currently complete CDA internship components in a partnership with Educare's Grow Your Own program in nearby school districts. The College will expand its work-study program for paid internships in childcare centers to help students obtain hands-on, experiential learning.

Offering two defined early childhood tracks will appeal to students with different educational or career aspirations. The Classic Track results in the bachelor of arts (BA) degree and enables careers as preschool and childcare directors. With a faster-than-average 11% growth rate ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)) and an average salary of \$23.63 per hour, the need to increase the number of students in this track is clear. Students in the Career Track will earn the CDA credential, which prepares them to work in high-quality early care and education facilities that offer higher entry-level salaries and benefits. The next step is for these students to enroll in the Early Childhood Educator associate in applied sciences (AAS) degree program, which in turn qualifies them to pursue credentialing as a Professional Development Specialist to evaluate CDA candidates and supplement their income in the field. Each track has full- and part-time formats and requires a different package of courses outlined for students through intentional advising and clearer marketing materials.

According to a study from the [Nebraska Legislature's Appropriations Committee](#), 231 licensed providers in Nebraska permanently closed during the pandemic. Nebraska and three other states lead the nation with the highest number of parents in the workforce – a demonstration of the critical need for more high-quality early childhood professionals. A dearth of childcare workers paints a troubling picture for Nebraska's busy working families. Supporting The College's proposed Early Childhood Project will help create a stronger pipeline of well-trained, qualified early childhood workers to care for our youngest citizens and meet the needs of Nebraska's working families.

## Section 2: Key Objectives

### **Perkins V Priority 1 (Aligned CTE programs)**

The project will meet this goal by linking the noncredit CDA certificate to credit programming through Classic and Career Tracks that better align with The College's career technical education. To jumpstart this alignment, students with a CDA in hand will earn 17-19 credit hours toward an Early Childhood Educator AAS degree at The College. Each student in The College's self-paced CDA programs has access to a personal coach who will guide them to a credit-bearing pathway that meets their educational or career goals.

On the Classic Track, students will follow a roadmap of coursework which enables them to earn an AAS degree and then transfer to a BA-granting institution. The College currently has Transfer Agreements with several regional colleges and will continue to create seamless transitions for students. Recognizing that not all students want to pursue a BA, The College's Career Track bundles the credits earned through the CDA certification along with necessary courses to earn an AAS and enter the workforce, followed by the optional pursuit of a PD Specialist or Coach certification. Too many students waste credits and money taking courses that are not necessary for their educational or career goals. By clearly communicating the requirements of each track through enhanced marketing and 1:1 interaction with students, this problem can be corrected.

During the grant period, the Early Childhood Coordinator and other personnel will work with regional four-year colleges to build stronger course alignment and develop user-friendly materials that identify the courses needed within each track. Improved mentoring and advising practices will ensure that students begin and persist on the right track. The College has been at the forefront of CTE alignment as the first community college to collaborate with the NDE on CDA improvements. NDE has a two-year college consortium group working to bridge connections to other trainings and provide CDA/Professional Development Specialist training for more consistent delivery of CDA programming. The new online system will be designed to meet students in rural areas across the state. The College's interactive CDA, which grew out of these collaborative efforts, serves as a catalyst for NDE in building a statewide CDA system.

### **Perkins V Priority 2 (Systemic Career Development)**

The proposed project will meet this goal by providing multiple early childhood educator pathways for individuals to determine their interests and establish educational and career goals. Students enrolled in The College's CDA programs may be GED, high school, or adult students. They will receive coaching designed to help them take logical next steps and stay on their selected path in order to attain their individual academic and career goals. The existing and proposed CDA programs will be entirely online and asynchronous, making them accessible to individuals living in rural parts of Nebraska, as well as those with family or employment commitments that make traditional educational structures and schedules challenging. Online learning communities, guided by the Coordinator, faculty, members of the Advisory Committee, and other partners in the field, will meet monthly to establish stronger cohorts among CDA students, motivate each other to succeed, and share career opportunities. The Coordinator will serve as a liaison to disseminate information from meetings and other conferences to key stakeholders.

Students on the Career Track will take the courses necessary to transition from a CDA to an AAS. Once credentialed as a CDA, they will gain opportunities to upskill through PD Specialist or coach credentialing and receive access to a coach for support and encouragement. Becoming a PD Specialist offers a potentially lucrative form of supplemental income as the need to conduct Verification Visits for CDA candidates in Nebraska rises. The number of new CDAs entering the state's workforce jumped from 55 in 2020 to 140 in 2021, yet the number of active PDs in the state stagnates at 29.

Improving alignment within CTE programs and improving systemic career development processes will make it easier to recruit and assist students for whom educational opportunities seem out of reach. The College is the most diverse accredited institution of higher learning in Nebraska. Several of The College's campuses and sites sit in or near Qualified Opportunity Zones, and the college serves many underprepared, first-generation, low-income, and marginalized students. Addressing equity gaps is inherent in the college's mission to "deliver relevant, student-centered education to a diverse community of learners."

Expanding partnerships with organizations like Educare's Early Head Start will grow efforts to serve lower-income families in underserved communities. The College already has Learning Community partnerships in impoverished areas in North and South Omaha focused on early childhood education. The new bilingual coordinator will be housed in these areas, as well.

Creating online CDA programs gives individuals in rural areas access to educational opportunities that can lead to employment and upskilling. The College is committed to continuing to meet the needs of its Spanish-language students beyond CDA coursework, as well. Students enrolled in the proposed Spanish-language CDA program may develop English-language skills through free ESL courses at The College. According to [DHS data](#) (p. 11), Hispanics in Nebraska are the demographic group most likely to have less than a high school education and 7.1% are unemployed, putting them at a serious disadvantage as they enter the workforce.

Additionally, one-third of Nebraska's population below the age of 5 are not white; however, the early childcare workforce is predominantly white. Recruiting more diversity to the profession will result in a workforce that more closely mirrors the population it serves. The proposed CDA Expansion and Enhancement Project offers a flexible learning environment and robust support system to attract and prepare a more diverse cohort for success as early childcare professionals across the state.

### **Outcomes and Connections to Work Underway**

A primary outcome of the proposed project will be a significant increase in enrollment in The College's CDA programs to help meet the state's workforce demands in this field. A 2021 Nebraska legislative study that includes data from the Buffett Early Childhood Institute shows that 43% of Nebraskans reduced their working hours to [care for children](#) during the pandemic, and [84% of Nebraska counties](#) that have childcare options are unable to meet staffing demands. These deficiencies underscore the

need for a dependable and qualified early childhood workforce so parents and guardians may return to work.

Additional outcomes for the proposed project include the addition of innovative Spanish-language CDA programs, enhancements to existing CDA learning modules, and the creation of a new CDA program. The project also will result in broader outreach and recruitment from rural communities, as well as stronger mentoring and advising practices to help students meet their goals through one of the two tracks. With two asynchronous online CDA programs already established and a clear institutional investment in early education, the proposed initiative represents a logical extension of The College's existing work to create flexible pathways for students.