



Grow Your Own ECE: Higher Education as an Essential Partner

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Introduction

Early care and education (ECE) is integral to every community's social fabric, and the field is facing a crisis. Despite their essential work, ECE educators face low compensation, challenging working conditions, and limited access to educator preparation programs, contributing to a nationwide shortage of qualified early childhood educators.

Experts predict the need for 1.5 million new ECE educators by 2030.¹ Addressing the complexity of the workforce shortage necessitates comprehensive strategies and collective actions. Institutions of higher education (IHEs) have an opportunity and responsibility to be part of these solutions through collaborative community partnerships.

Grow Your Own initiatives are designed to intentionally cultivate talent and expertise from within communities.

These initiatives often take a careful, purposeful approach that focuses on specific communities, such as those with shared language, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. This approach aligns with research showing positive outcomes when children have educators who share their cultural background.^{2,3} The same principle applies to recruiting and hiring faculty members and instructors in higher education. Adult learners in early childhood education programs also benefit from culturally sustaining educational experiences and courses taught by instructors who share and understand their cultural backgrounds.^{4,5} Supporting Grow Your Own strategies not only benefits communities but also presents advantages for higher education, including diversifying the student population, forging connections with community leaders, and accessing funding to support programs.

This brief builds upon the ideas in "[Grow Your Own ECE: An Introduction](#)" and "[Grow Your Own ECE: Cultivating Community Partnerships](#)," and is geared towards faculty and leadership at IHEs to encourage working with communities to Grow Your Own early childhood educators. This brief explores the benefits of IHE-community partnerships in Grow Your Own initiatives, the necessary shifts in policies and practices to support these efforts, and steps IHEs can take to lay the groundwork for successful collaboration.

What is Grow Your Own?

Grow Your Own is an umbrella term that describes the many dynamic, community-driven, equity-centered, and holistic approaches designed to help communities support, strengthen, and sustain a well-qualified, experienced, diverse ECE workforce.

These initiatives recognize that talent exists within the current workforce and among individuals who may not have considered a career in ECE. Talent in this context refers not only to the skills, knowledge, and expertise that individuals possess, but also to their unique life experiences, cultural backgrounds, and connections to the communities they serve.

Grow Your Own approaches aim to nurture and develop this talent by providing opportunities for professional growth, removing barriers to entering and staying in the field, and creating pathways for career advancement. Read "[Grow Your Own ECE: An Introduction](#)," to learn more about the essential elements to building and sustaining a successful Grow Your Own effort.



Why Should IHEs Partner for Grow Your Own?

Partnering with local communities to support Grow Your Own initiatives offers numerous benefits for IHEs. These programs attract students from diverse backgrounds, including non-traditional students, creating a more inclusive learning environment that enriches the educational experience for all students and prepares them to work more effectively in diverse settings.⁶ For example, North Seattle College's ECE program has successfully partnered with local community organizations to recruit and support cohorts of ECE students in five languages, many of whom are first-generation college students or come from underrepresented backgrounds. This partnership has not only increased the diversity of the college's ECE program but has also helped to address the workforce needs of the local community.

By collaborating with local communities to prepare qualified early educators, IHEs can help address the critical shortage of early childhood professionals and meet the workforce needs of their region.⁷ Partnering with local organizations provides valuable insights into the community's unique needs, enabling the co-creation of relevant and responsive programs.⁸ To ensure success, partners should seek out diverse funding sources, navigate institutional barriers, collect and analyze data for continuous improvement, and stay informed about relevant state and federal policies.^{6,9} For instance, the University of Washington's ECE program secured a \$43 million grant from Ballmer Group to expand access to ECE degrees for diverse students.¹⁰

Participating in Grow Your Own initiatives demonstrates an institution's commitment to the local community, helping to build trust, improving relationships, and establishing the institution as a valued community partner.¹¹ IHEs can play an important role by delivering courses at conveniently located times and places, contextualizing coursework within the context of early educators' classrooms, and facilitating relationships between departments and programs (e.g., Continuing and Professional Education, Office of Partnerships) to ensure student success. These programs often provide students with a comprehensive support system that includes mentoring, tutoring, cohort modeling, and field experience opportunities. These supports have been shown to improve student retention, completion, and job placement rates.

By investing in these support structures, IHEs can ensure that their students have the necessary tools and resources to succeed both academically and professionally. Moreover, hiring students as mentors within the Grow Your Own initiative can create an additional pathway for student success and professional development. This approach not only benefits the mentees but also provides valuable leadership experience for the student mentors, further enhancing their skills and employability.^{7,12}

Many grants and funding streams are available to support Grow Your Own initiatives, which can help IHEs secure additional resources to enhance their ECE programs and support student success. By prioritizing comprehensive support, creating student leadership opportunities, and advocating for supportive policies, IHEs can foster a strong foundation for the success of their Grow Your Own programs and the students they serve. By embracing this opportunity, IHEs can play a vital role in strengthening the ECE workforce and contributing to the overall well-being of the communities they serve.

Making Necessary Shifts

Grow Your Own initiatives are community-driven programs that aim to expand pathways into the ECE profession by attracting and preparing students from within local communities. These programs recognize that each community faces unique needs and challenges, requiring tailored solutions. Grow Your Own



serves a diverse range of students, including high school students, substitutes, paraprofessionals, parents returning to the workforce, career changers from related fields, and traditional students.

To effectively support these aspiring educators, IHEs must adopt nimble practices and policies that are responsive to the needs of the local community and implement evidence-based strategies that promote student success and retention. This requires fundamental changes in areas such as program delivery models, credit transfer policies, student support services, and recruitment practices (of both students and faculty). Transitioning to support all students through Grow Your Own partnerships effectively necessitates fundamental shifts for many institutions:

- Implement flexible program delivery options like evening/weekend courses, blended online learning, and workplace-embedded classes. These adaptations can make higher education more accessible for working adults and caregivers.¹³
- In addition to flexible scheduling, consider ways to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of full-time working ECE professionals. For example, practical courses that focus on subjects like trauma-informed care or working with children with special needs may be more applicable and appreciated if offered upfront rather than a focus on theory. Research has shown that ECE professionals value learning opportunities that directly relate to their daily work and help them better support the children in their care.^{14 15} By prioritizing relevant, hands-on learning experiences, IHEs can help ECE professionals build the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their roles and advance their careers.
- Create transparent processes to award credit for prior learning and work experience. "I realized that if I wanted

Adaptive Leadership Skills to Support Collaborative Community Partnerships

Active listening and open communication:

Practice active listening and seek to understand different viewpoints, even if they differ from your own.¹⁷ This is particularly important when engaging with community partners who may have different cultural backgrounds, experiences, and priorities than those typically represented in higher education settings.

Curiosity and humility: Be open to feedback and insights that challenge your assumptions about what makes an effective early childhood educator or reveal areas where your institution's policies and practices need to evolve to better support diverse learners.¹⁸ Recognize that community partners bring valuable expertise and knowledge to the table and be willing to learn from their experiences.

Resilience and adaptability: Cultivate a sense of resilience and adaptability in the face of setbacks or uncertainty, and be willing to try new approaches or adapt your strategies as needed to achieve your goals.¹⁷ This may involve advocating for policy changes, seeking out new funding sources, or finding creative ways to leverage existing resources.

Collaborative leadership: Seek to balance multiple perspectives and priorities while staying focused on your institution's mission and values.¹⁸ This may involve creating working groups that bring together diverse community representatives to guide the development and implementation of your Grow Your Own programs.

Equity-minded leadership: Actively work to identify and dismantle systemic barriers that may prevent underrepresented groups from accessing or succeeding in your institution's ECE programs. This may involve examining your institution's policies and practices related to admissions, financial aid, curriculum, and student support services to ensure that they are inclusive and equitable.¹⁹ It may also involve providing training and support for faculty and staff to help them develop more culturally responsive and equity-minded approaches to teaching and advising.



to work here and become a part of the team, I needed to become certified, and Grow Your Own was the fastest and quickest way to get in the program. This is the best job ever." - ECE Grow Your Own program participant.^{16 17 18 19}

- Hire community liaisons to connect with local partners and recruit prospective students, as well as faculty and instructors from the community, particularly those with shared cultural and language backgrounds. "Our liaison amplified awareness of our programs tenfold, and enrollment from the community tripled in one year." - Dean of Education²⁰
- Changes may involve updating institutional mindsets. Engage interested and involved parties early and often to increase buy-in. "At first, some were hesitant about 'lowering the bar,' but they soon saw how much our faculty and students gained." - ECE Department Chair²¹

Engaging community members is crucial for increasing buy-in and support for Grow Your Own initiatives. IHEs can employ various strategies to effectively involve faculty, staff, and community members in the planning and implementation process. These strategies include:

- **Conducting listening sessions** to understand the concerns and perspectives of affected community members.²² This allows IHEs to address potential barriers and incorporate community feedback into the design of Grow Your Own programs.
- **Sharing data and success stories** that demonstrate the impact of Grow Your Own programs on student outcomes and community well-being.⁷ Highlighting the positive results of these initiatives can help build support among skeptical individuals.
- **Involving key community members in the planning and implementation** of Grow Your Own initiatives to foster a sense of ownership and commitment.⁸ When community members feel invested in the process, they are more likely to champion the program and contribute to its success.

Making these shifts to embrace the assets of all students and adapt systems to local realities is no small feat, but it has the potential to make positive impacts across a community. Students feel empowered and gain access to rewarding careers. ECE programs benefit from diverse, well-qualified professionals dedicated to the community. IHEs diversify their student body and faculty, reduce equity gaps, and revitalize relationships with the broader community. Additionally, the contextual learning opportunities and community connections help enhance the quality and relevance of the higher education program itself. Most importantly, young children and families gain educators who share their lived experiences and can provide culturally responsive care and education.

With increased diversity and qualifications of the ECE workforce, the quality of early learning environments increases, launching children on a path to reach their full potential. The ripple effects of these fundamental shifts are transformative for individuals, institutions, and communities alike.

“Grow Your Own programs are not only a strategy to recruit and retain teachers of color, but also a vehicle to potentially transform teacher education by centering the knowledge, skills, and experiences of communities of color in the preparation of teachers.”²³

- Faculty member (New America, 2021)



Collaborative Partnerships

In addition to shifting internal practices and policies to better serve prospective Grow Your Own students, establishing external partnerships is key for successful collaborative initiatives. Partnerships with local organizations that offer diverse perspectives and representative leadership—including early childhood organizations, school districts, Workforce Development Boards, cultural centers, trusted community leaders, community foundations, advocacy groups, and other community entities—enable Grow Your Own programs to be tailored to the community's specific needs. These collaborations are essential for recruiting prospective students, providing field experience opportunities, accessing funding streams, and ensuring initiatives are culturally responsive and equitable.

Effective partnerships require intention and effort from IHEs and community organizations through formal structures like memoranda of understanding. The following strategies can help guide collaborative partnership efforts:

- Form an advisory council with local partners to assess needs and co-create Grow Your Own initiatives
- Engage in co-development and shared leadership to ensure that all constituents have a voice in shaping the program
- Access funding like Workforce Innovation grants or Preschool Development Birth to Five grants. Over 75% of these grants fund staffing, scholarships, or other Grow Your Own expenses.

Strong community partnerships require ongoing communication, evaluation, and evolution. After initiating partnerships through strategies like advisory councils and memorandums of understanding, it is critical to maintain partnerships through regular meetings to assess progress, gather feedback, and adjust approaches. Prioritize co-creation and shared decision-making throughout the process to ensure that the program remains responsive to the needs of the community.

Evaluating data like enrollment trends, student diversity, and outcomes will help identify what is working well and where further adaptation is needed. Maintaining a learning mindset deepens partnerships and initiatives to improve continuously to meet the community's needs. Encourage open dialogue and feedback from all partners to foster a culture of continuous improvement. With time and intention, the collaborative synergy between IHEs and community partners can create tailored solutions for recruiting, preparing, and empowering the next generation of early childhood educators.

Summary and Next Steps

IHEs are critical to addressing the ECE workforce shortage and strengthening the educator pipeline. By partnering with local communities to support Grow Your Own initiatives, IHEs can tap into a diverse pool of talent, create pathways for non-traditional students, and ensure that ECE programs have access to well-prepared, culturally responsive educators. The benefits of these partnerships are far-reaching, extending beyond the IHEs themselves to the students, ECE programs, and the broader community.

However, realizing these benefits requires a commitment to fundamental shifts in policies, practices, and mindsets. Leaders at IHEs must be willing to examine and challenge their own mental models and assumptions about what makes a successful early childhood educator and who has the potential to thrive in these roles. This may involve recognizing and valuing the unique strengths and experiences that non-traditional students bring to the table, as well as actively working to dismantle systemic barriers that have



historically excluded certain groups from accessing higher education and career opportunities in ECE. By embracing a mindset of continuous learning, growth, and innovation, IHE leaders can create a culture that supports the success of all students and fosters meaningful partnerships with the community.

Achieving the full potential of Grow Your Own initiatives also demands intentional collaboration and ongoing communication with community partners. By taking strategic steps to assess readiness, engage community members, and dedicate resources to these efforts, IHEs can catalyze transformative change and play a vital role in building a strong, diverse, sustainable ECE workforce for generations to come.

Take Action

The call is clear—higher education has a valuable role to play in growing the next generation of qualified early childhood educators. However, shifting mindsets and systems takes time. Where can institutions start to move towards meaningful partnerships in Grow Your Own initiatives? Key steps to catalyze progress include:

- Audit existing policies and programs and examine alignment with Grow Your Own goals. For example, San Francisco State University conducted a comprehensive review of its ECE program and identified opportunities to streamline coursework, offer flexible scheduling options, and provide targeted support services for diverse students.²⁴
- Initiate contact with local early childhood organizations and leaders
- Send a team to visit an established Grow Your Own program and learn best practices
- Communicate a vision and dedicate resources to make Grow Your Own a strategic priority

Access the [refection tool](#) to explore your institution's strengths and readiness and to develop strategies for ensuring a successful partnership in a Grow Your Own effort.

Entry Points for Grow Your Own Partnership

If your institution is not yet ready to fully commit to partnering for Grow Your Own initiatives, there are several steps you can take to lay the groundwork for future partnerships.

1. **Engage in dialogue with community partners:** Even if IHEs are not yet ready to formally partner for Grow Your Own initiatives, they can begin building relationships and engaging in dialogue with potential community partners. This could include reaching out to local ECE providers, schools, community organizations, and families to understand their needs, perspectives, and priorities related to workforce development. By listening and learning from community partners, IHEs can lay the foundation for future collaboration and ensure that their programs are responsive to local contexts.
2. **Hire staff and faculty from the communities you are serving or seek to serve:** IHEs can prioritize hiring staff and faculty who come from or have deep connections to the communities they serve or aim to serve through Grow Your Own initiatives. This approach can help to diversify the IHE's workforce, bringing in valuable perspectives and experiences that can inform and enhance their ECE programs.²⁵ Staff and faculty from the community can serve as powerful role models and mentors for Grow Your Own participants, helping to create a more welcoming, culturally responsive learning environment.^{26 27} Moreover, by tapping into local talent pools, IHEs can begin to build a pipeline of future Grow Your Own partners and leaders who are deeply invested in their communities' success. While hiring staff and faculty from the community may require IHEs to re-



evaluate their recruitment and selection processes, this investment can pay significant dividends in terms of program quality, student outcomes, and community engagement.

3. **Provide professional development for faculty and staff:** IHEs can invest in professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to build their capacity to support diverse learners and promote equity in early childhood education. This could include training on culturally responsive teaching practices, implicit bias, and strategies for supporting non-traditional students. By equipping faculty and staff with the knowledge and skills needed to create inclusive learning environments, IHEs can begin to shift institutional culture and practices.
4. **Review and revise policies and practices:** IHEs can review and revise their policies and practices related to admissions, financial aid, advising, and student support to identify and remove barriers that may disproportionately impact underrepresented students. This could include streamlining credit transfer processes, offering flexible scheduling options, or providing targeted financial support for Grow Your Own participants. By creating more equitable and accessible pathways into and through ECE programs, IHEs can begin to diversify their student body and workforce pipeline.
5. **Explore alternative program delivery models:** IHEs can explore alternative program delivery models that are more responsive to the needs and constraints of the ECE workforce, particularly those working in settings like family child care homes. This could include offering online or hybrid courses, providing on-site classes at community locations, or developing competency-based programs that recognize prior learning and experience.^{14 28} By creating more flexible and accessible pathways to credentials and degrees, IHEs can begin to break down barriers that have traditionally excluded certain segments of the ECE workforce from higher education opportunities.
6. **Advocate for supportive policies and funding:** Even if IHEs are not yet ready to launch full-scale Grow Your Own partnerships, they can use their institutional voice and influence to advocate for policies and funding streams that support workforce diversity and equity in ECE. This could include advocating for increased public investment in ECE, supporting legislation that addresses compensation and working conditions for the field, or championing initiatives that provide financial support for Grow Your Own participants. By leveraging their expertise and credibility, IHEs can help to create an enabling environment for Grow Your Own partnerships to take root and thrive.

By taking these initial steps, IHEs can begin to lay the groundwork for future Grow Your Own partnerships and demonstrate their commitment to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in the ECE workforce. Over time, as IHEs build relationships, capacity, and momentum for change, they can gradually deepen their engagement in Grow Your Own initiatives and become full partners in these transformative efforts.

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