

REVIEW OF THE CENTER FOR CHILD WELFARE AND ADOPTION STUDIES

Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) Code: 90.4407
Research and Service Center: Social Work

OVERVIEW

The Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies (hereinafter the “center”) at Illinois State University was founded in 1998 as the Center for Adoption Studies. The center was established in response to a request from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) for assistance from the School of Social Work at the University in evaluating child welfare outcomes in the state. In May 1999 Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) staff approved a request from the University for temporary (five-year) IBHE recognition of the center and its partnership with IDCFS. From that initial partnership, the Center for Adoption Studies became known as the primary research unit within the state of Illinois charged with studying the impact of adoption on children in the foster care system. Recognizing the long-term contributions of the center in the areas of public policy and applied research, the IBHE approved a University request for permanent recognition of the center in June 2005.

Since its initial work regarding adoption in Illinois, the mission of the center has broadened beyond adoption research to examine the full range of child welfare-related scholarly and programming initiatives including foster care, child and family well-being, educational outcomes for vulnerable youth, and culturally-responsive child welfare practice. The Center examines child welfare and adoption scholarly inquiries on a national and international scale. In keeping with this evolution of mission, the center name was changed from the Center for Adoption Studies to the Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies effective October 15, 2015. The mission of the center was also revised to read: *The Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies promotes culturally-grounded, empirically-based research and policy that informs child welfare and adoption practice and improves child and family well-being at the local, state, and national level.* The center’s objectives are:

Goal 1: Initiate, implement, and disseminate culturally grounded, applied research and practice innovations that inform public policy and advances child welfare and adoption knowledge.

Goal 2: Provide research, leadership, innovation, and professional development to advance child and family well-being.

Goal 3: Provide a laboratory for students and University faculty that enables them to engage in research, teaching, programming, and service learning related to child welfare service, adoption practice, and access to higher education.

Goal 4: Engage collaboratively with educators, practitioners, researchers, and policy makers to promote child and family well-being with a special focus on vulnerable and marginalized populations.

Goal 5: Serve as a source of information and resources for local, national, and international human service leaders and higher education stakeholders who are charged with addressing pressing issues within our society.

The Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies is one of two known higher education research centers in the nation that produces an inclusive spectrum of adoption and child welfare research, programming, and policy analyses. This is the third full review of the center since it was granted permanent center status.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY PROGRAM REVIEW SELF-STUDY REPORT

Introduction and overview

The Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies is a grant-funded unit operating under the School of Social Work within the College of Arts and Sciences at the University. The School provides administrative support through clerical assistance, payment processing, budget tracking, and website maintenance. A tenured social work faculty member serves as the Center's director, overseeing administrative needs, strategic planning, initiative development and implementation, external funding efforts, and assessment. The Center staff comprises full-time faculty with expertise in areas such as child welfare, adoption, child development, family communication, education policy, organizational development, and culturally responsive practices. While the director coordinates the Center's initiatives, other faculty members from the School of Social Work or across the University often

contribute to the implementation. Known as "faculty affiliates," they may serve as principal investigators, co-principal investigators, or contracted faculty for Center projects. These affiliates agree to uphold the Center's mission and goals, complying with the specific expectations of the associated funding sources.

The Center promotes inclusive excellence, with 5 out of 9 faculty/staff from underrepresented groups during 2017-2023. Each of the externally funded initiatives focused on addressing systemic barriers for underserved communities. In 2018, a partnership with Management Development International broadened the Center's scope to provide training and professional development to post-colonial developing nations in Africa and the Caribbean implementing social safety models.

The Illinois Permanency Enhancement Project (PEP) is one of the central projects of the center. PEP originated in 2008 as a collaborative effort among the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS), the IDCFS African American Advisory Council, the Illinois African American Family Commission, and the Center. Driven by concerns over the overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system and the need to enhance family permanency and child well-being among DCFS-involved families, the initiative expanded statewide in FY08. Throughout this FY24 reporting period, university partnerships between IDCFS, Illinois State University, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Northern Illinois University continued. Notably, funding for this initiative more than doubled in FY23 compared to the previous year.

First Star Academy is a national initiative founded in 1999 to improve the lives of child victims of abuse and neglect through college preparation programs delivered by partner organizations. Since the prior program review, the Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies has partnered with First Star Academy to provide college readiness services for a cohort of Central Illinois high school students associated with the foster care system. Services include academic enrichment through courses taught by university faculty, life skills training, and mentoring by university students affiliated with the center.

The Child Welfare Training Academy at the Illinois State University is in the initial planning stages of a 36-month contract with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) from July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2026. As required by Illinois PA 99-0348, which mandates DCFS to develop a Child Protection Training Academy for Child Protective Investigators and their supervisors, the University will serve as the central Illinois site for the following purposes:

- Developing simulation training content for investigations, intact and permanency workers, and supervisors on recognizing and responding to child abuse and neglect, focused on DCFS needs.
- Establishing and delivering cultural competency training to ensure DCFS's response to families and children of color includes culturally responsive services.
- Establishing simulation labs with mock environments (homes, medical facilities, courtrooms, interview rooms) for simulated training.
- Assisting DCFS in establishing minimum competency standards for certification, aligned with DCFS practices through the Office of Learning and Professional Development.

Through the Lifebook Work with Children project, the center provides Lifebook workshops, services to children and families, and training materials to child welfare practitioners. Lifebooks are documents comprised of pictures, stories, and artifacts organized chronologically to preserve a child's major life events. Lifebooks can be used as a therapeutic tool to help youth integrate past experiences with their present circumstances in a healthy and constructive manner.

Accomplishments since the prior program review

Expanded funding sources. Externally funded research and programming initiatives during this program review period (2017-2023) are as follows:

- The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) *Office of Education and Transition Services* (First Star Academy- Avant/Houston)

- The National First Star Academy Foundation (First Star Academy- Avant/Houston)
- Give Something Back Foundation (First Star Academy- Avant/Houston)
- The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) *Office of Racial Equity Practice* (Illinois Permanency Enhancement Project- Houston)
- The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) *Office of Learning and Professional Development* (Child Protection Training Academy- Houston/Mann)

In addition to funded projects, the Center has established non-funded service-related partnerships and initiatives with the following organizations:

- Management Development International (MDI)- *ISU Office of International Engagement* – International Professional Development for non-profit administrators and governmental officials from Ghana and Haiti (Houston/Harris)
- Illinois Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)- Diversity training and Foster Parent and CASA volunteer Lifebook training (Houston)
- Illinois Black Administrators in Child Welfare Leadership Institute - Professional Development for emerging child welfare professionals and administrators (Burns/Houston/Mann)

Media presentations/interviews. Successful efforts to expand center research and programming have resulted in positive media coverage and increased visibility for the center. Center initiatives have been featured by the local, state, and national media. Below is a selection of recent media coverage:

- WGLT Radio Interview- The Exonerated Five (Houston, 2023)
- NBC universal-How adoption agencies are responding to Roe v. Wade (Houston, 2022)
- WGLT Radio Interview- “Opportunity for Change at State’s Child Welfare Agency” (Houston, 2019)
- Glamour Magazine National Podcast- “Broken Hearts” (Houston, 2018)
- U.S. News and World Report: Illinois State University Pursues College for Foster Youths (May 2017)
- The Pantagraph: ISU program to put foster youths on path to college (May 2017)

Expanded student research and learning opportunities. The Center has re-established itself as a fully operational learning laboratory for students who serve as paid and unpaid research assistants, interns, and volunteers. Center faculty members have overseen student research, internship, or employment opportunities since the prior program review, nearly half involving students from traditionally underrepresented groups.

Engagement in interdisciplinary partnerships with other units at Illinois State University. In line with Illinois State’s goal to increase interdisciplinary partnerships, the Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies is currently engaged in several collaborations that exemplify interdisciplinary faculty research and programming partnerships. Partnerships across campus include:

Research

- School of Communication: Dr. Aimee Miller Ott (Co-PI for Spenser Foundation FAYS II research and publication) 2015-2021
- Family and Consumer Science: Dr. Ani Yazedjian (First Star Academy and Care4U joint research and youth life skills programming) Implemented in 2018.
- Psychology: Dr. Brea Banks served as data analyst for the PEP initiative (2018-2020)
- School of Teaching and Learning: Dr. Steve Mertens serves as data analyst for the PEP initiative (2020-present)

Programming

- University College: Dr. Jamillah Gilbert (Asst Director, First Star Academy, 2018-2021)
- Educational Administration & Foundations: Dr. Venus Evans-Winter (First Star Academy Faculty Instructor) summer 2017

- Special Education: Jamillah Gilbert (First Star Academy Program Coordinator) spring/summer 2017
- University College/Visor Center: Dr. Amelia Noel-Elkins, Amy Roser, Christa Platt, Pam Ambrose (First Star Academy Academic Prep workshops) summer 2017
- University College: Amy Roser: (Youth in Care Scholars Network annual fall reception) 2015-present
- Student Counseling Services: Dakesa Pina, Ph.D., and Jillian Richardson, Psy.D. (First Star Academy Life skills Workshops) summer 2017

Assessment

The Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies assesses performance projections through the use of its revised logic model that includes short-term, intermediate, and long-term strategic goals.

Core Components of the Center's Logic Model:

- **INPUTS** – What we invest: resources, contributions, investments that go into the program.
- **OUTPUTS** - What we do: activities, services, events and products that reach people who participate or who are targeted.
- **OUTCOMES** – What we accomplish: results or changes for individuals, groups, communities, organizations, communities, or systems in the short, medium and long term.
- **Assumptions** - The beliefs we have about the program, the people involved, and the context and the way we think the program will work and the values that guide our work.
- **External Factors** - The environment in which the program exists, the variety of external factors that interact with and influence the Center's actions and our ability to achieve our goals.

Resources

During this review period, the center has been supported almost exclusively by grants from external entities. Since inception of the center in 1999, external grants and contributions have totaled approximately \$6.6 million. The School of Social Work continues to provide in-kind contributions in the form of facilities, administrative staff support, and faculty release time. During the current self-study period (**2017-2023**), Center funding from external sources totaled **\$2,097,839**.

Response to previous program review recommendations

Continue efforts to secure external funding. During the current self-study period, the Center has expanded its funding sources and increased funding across all programs with Center funding from external sources totaling **\$2,097,839** during this self-study period. Moreover, in 2023, the Center welcomed a new partnership with the State of Illinois' Office of Learning and Professional Development within DCFS. This partnership involves the establishment of a Child Protection Simulation Training Center lead by the Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies. External funding for this renewable 3-year initiative (FY24-FY27) totals 2.5 million dollars.

Continue efforts to expand interdisciplinary partnerships. Interdisciplinary partnerships within the Center continue to expand. During the current review, faculty/staff affiliates from the school of teaching and learning, university college, and psychology have contributed to initiatives lead by the center. Additionally, the Center is pleased to have established a partnership with MDI out of The Office of International Engagement to support the development and enhancement of social safety net programs and policies that support previously colonized countries including Ghana, and Haiti. While these programs were suspended due to travel restrictions during COVID19, the center looks forward to resuming professional development activities with MDI as soon as feasible.

Continue implementing and refining the assessment plan for the Center. Due to staffing limitations and the onset of COVID, an enhanced assessment plan was unable to be implemented during the current review period. However, this continues to be a goal for the Center. Moving forward, Center faculty would welcome additional dedicated administrative resources and/or faculty release time to refine and implement a formal assessment plan with University Assessment as recommended.

Major findings of this self-study

- The Center has met expectations related to expanding and diversifying its funding sources.
- The Center has met expectations through increased interdisciplinary faculty research and program partnerships.
- The Center has exceeded expectations related to student service learning, research, and mentoring opportunities.
- The Center continues its goal to expand its national footprint through paper presentations, journal publications, media coverage, and national policy talks.
- The Center continues to require dedicated administrative support and faculty release time to address recommendations to implement a sustained and structured assessment process.

Initiatives for the next program review cycle

Looking to the future, the Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies will continue its goal to lead the field of child welfare through innovation, research, interdisciplinary partnerships, and student engagement. The resulting review has led us to conclude that the Center supports the core values of *Educate, Connect, and Elevate*. The Center's support of the core values also extends to the involvement of students in our work and the direct supervision and mentoring they receive along with our commitment to civic engagement. Further, the Center continues to fulfill its mission through human capital, innovation, and scholarship that supports the ideals of the Social Work discipline and the objectives of Illinois State University by preparing students and practitioners to meet the demands of a diverse, global society while adhering to the economic priorities of the State through evidence-based, cost-effective, applied research. Looking to the future, the Center has the following goals:

- Expand the dissemination of Center generated applied knowledge to include national and international publication outlets.
- Successfully launch and implement the Illinois State university Child Protection Simulation Training Center
- Attract Social Work and Interdisciplinary faculty with an interest and expertise in child and family well-being.
- Continue to support experiential learning opportunities for ISU students.
- Establish administrative support for the Center to allow for enhanced and diversified funding exploration, procurement, and program assessment.

PROGRAM REVIEW OUTCOME AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ACADEMIC PLANNING COMMITTEE

Review Outcome. The Academic Planning Committee, as a result of this review process, finds the Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies to be in Good Standing.

The Academic Planning Committee thanks the Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies for their efforts in completing a comprehensive self-study report. The self-study is thorough with insightful evidence provided throughout the report. The committee commends the center for engaging multiple key stakeholder groups in its planning processes. Evidence of continuous feedback from the stakeholder groups was also acknowledged by the committee. The committee applauds the establishment of an advisory board.

The center is an affiliate of the School of Social Work within the College of Arts and Sciences. The committee recognizes the center's thoughtful and well-developed organization structure that is clearly outlined by the organizational chart. The committee praised the center for the intentional alignment between their strategic plan and the university's strategic plan. A combination of long and short-term features of the center's plan have been linked to the university's *Educate-Connect-Elevate* Strategic Plan. A strong infusion of EDI-focused initiatives is also present in the center's plan as well as their daily operations. The committee also commends the center for its

interdisciplinary research efforts and the support of 65 service learning and student research projects from 2017 thru 2023.

The center's progress toward achieving its mission is grounded in five clearly written and well-developed goals. The committee notes the center's clear understanding of comparable university-based centers across the U.S. and their ability to identify, articulate, and capitalize on those qualities that make the center unique. One of these unique features is the center's research and practice innovations that are focused on community-engagement and EDI. The committee praises the center for its work in this area, including the professional development services provided within Africa and the Caribbean through a partnership with Management Development International (MDI) and the Office of International Engagement.

The committee notes the revised logic model that is utilized to assess the center's performance projections. The committee notes a clear alignment between the center's strategic plan and the goals within the logic model. The logic model includes a mix of nine short, intermediate, and long-term strategic goals that are assessed across five different areas: inputs, outputs, outcomes, assumptions, and external factors. The committee commends the center for its tracking of the outcome status of each of these goals.

The committee congratulates the center for securing and maintaining the annually renewable grant from the DCFS Office of Education and Transition Services since 2017. The committee also praises the center's annual securement and maintenance of renewable funding obtained from the Illinois Permanency Enhancement Project since FY 2007. The committee notes the sharp increase in funding received for this grant in FY 2023. The center's international work is also noteworthy. The committee acknowledges the center's links between their resources and accomplishments. The center's marketing efforts were also applauded by the committee.

Recommendations.

The Academic Planning Committee appreciates the work of the Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies staff in developing this self-study report. Overall, the report was well-written, thorough, and provided insightful information about the center's current initiatives and future plans. The committee congratulates the Center for Child Welfare and Adoption Studies on a successful four years.

In addition to the center's noteworthy efforts and accomplishments, the Academic Planning Committee provided recommendations for consideration. The committee's recommendations outlined below are to be addressed within the next regularly scheduled review cycle. Details describing the actions and outcomes associated with each of the committee's recommendations should be included in the next program review self-study report that is tentatively due October 1, 2028.

Maintain alignment with university strategic plan. The committee commends the center on its alignment with the university's strategic plan. As the university updates its strategic plan during the next review period, these efforts should be continued.

Continue engaging in the analysis of comparator programs. As the center and its services continue to grow, the committee recommends the center consider identifying additional comparators to review. The committee encourages the center to complete in-depth examinations of these larger comparator programs during its next review cycle and future strategic plan discussions.

Continue implementing and refining the center's assessment plan. The committee applauds the center's assessment targets and reporting of the outcomes of these targets. The committee encourages the center to continue its efforts to collect and utilize this data for in its future planning activities. Tracking of these outcomes might also provide insight or support for additional funding opportunities.

Continue seeking funding opportunities. The committee congratulates the center on securing ongoing external funding to support its programming and services. The committee also notes the center's efforts to apply for and obtain additional funding. The committee encourages the center to continue its pursuit of additional internal and external funding opportunities to support the continued growth of its services. The committee suggests the center seek additional feedback from various sources when submitting or receiving feedback from their smaller grant

applications. The feedback could be used to strengthen future applications. Working with Research and Sponsored Programs is also encouraged.