



EQUITY & DIVERSITY

EARLY CHILDHOOD LEADS THE WAY

Speaker Biographies

Alicia Meno, Ph.D.

Academic Director, National Louis University

Dr. Alicia Meno serves as Academic Director for ECE Competency-Based Programming and Assistant Professor Early Childhood and Elementary Education UGC National Louis University, and International Educator and Consultant. As a leader in education, Alicia brings a wealth of knowledge, including her passion for empowering multilingual populations and advocating for diversity, equity and inclusion.

Alicia also serves as a Coach and Coordinator for the Teacher Residency Program at SXU and is an adjunct professor for master and doctoral students at UOTP. She has served as an international school director, bilingual educational consultant, and teacher in Chicago and Latin America for over 29 years. She earned a Ph.D. in Curriculum Studies in 2003 from Depaul University, and published Professional Development Reform in 2008. She holds a B.A. in Elementary Education from Michigan State University (1993), and a M.A. in Bilingual & Multicultural Education from Columbia College (1997).

Alicia's areas of expertise include: International Education, Bilingual, ESL & Multicultural Education, Curriculum Design, Teacher Preparation, Teacher Professional Development, and Online Learning Programs. Her educational philosophy is: Teaching is the marriage of art and science. It is both a creative and methodological process that fosters learning.

Anne O. Brennan

Assistant Vice President Academic Affairs & College Transitions, Oakton College

Anne O. Brennan currently serves as the Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs and College Transitions at Oakton College. Over the past four decades she has held administrative and academic management roles at the University of Southern California, DePaul, SXU, City Colleges of Chicago, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her work included strategic planning, implementation of large student support systems, and oversight of enrollment, advising, student affairs, and alumni outreach. Her consistent area of interest over the years has been student and curriculum transfer between colleges.

Anni K. Reinking, Ed.D.

Reinking Education Consulting

Dr. Anni K. Reinking has been a state co-lead for the Illinois competency project since 2020. She is a former university professor, current education consultant, and author focused on early childhood environments. Her 7th book will be released in April 2023. Dr. Reinking currently works for the University of Illinois Chicago medical school in the pediatric department where she is able to support pediatricians in their community-based research.

Antonia Potenza, Ph.D.

Professor Emerita of Early Childhood Education, Roosevelt University

Antonia Potenza, Ph.D., is Professor Emerita at Roosevelt University in Chicago. Over the last 40 years, her career in early childhood education includes center and classroom teaching, as well as university faculty and administrative roles. She continues to teach and mentor ECE faculty, in addition to conducting research and advocacy for quality early childhood programming throughout Illinois.

Brian Durham, Ed.D.

Executive Director, Illinois Community College Board

Brian Durham is the Executive Director of the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB). In this role, he works with an eleven-member board of gubernatorial appointees on the development of policy and oversight of the state's 39 community college districts, and 48 colleges. This role involves a strong partnership with the Governor's Education Team, the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the Illinois State Board of Education, and members of the Illinois General Assembly. Dr. Durham also works closely with the Illinois Council of Community College Presidents, and the community college trustees, among many other community college constituent groups at the state and national level. Dr. Durham first joined the ICCB in 2003 and over the years as served in varying roles in the agency. Prior to his role as the Executive Director, Dr. Durham served as the agency's Chief Academic Officer where he regularly interfaced with the system's instructional leaders and faculty. Dr. Durham has also worked in the workforce development field and taught at both the community college and university levels. Dr. Durham holds an Ed.D. in Education Policy, Organization and Leadership from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, an MA in Political Science from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and a BA in Political Science from the University of Evansville. As a first-generation college student, Dr. Durham worked his way through college, including by serving as a member of the United States Army Reserves

Carolyn A. Beal, MS

ECE/ED Program Coordinator, Southwestern Illinois College

Carolyn Beal is the Early Childhood Education/Education Program Coordinator at Southwestern Illinois College. Her career in early childhood education spans over 35 years in a variety of settings. Those settings include child care center director, school psychologist, trainer and professor. She currently serves on several state and local committees and advisory boards.

Catherine Main

Senior Lecturer, University of Illinois Chicago

Catherine Main has nearly three decades of work on behalf of young children and their families in the state of Illinois. Her work at the UIC College of Education has included innovative and responsive program development and coordination in Early Childhood Education. Over the past five years she has secured over 7 million dollars in funding to support Early Childhood research and programming at UIC. She is a recipient of the 2019 UIC Award for Excellence in Teaching. As the PI on the Department of Education (DOE) grant: and The Chicago Early Childhood Preparation and Pathway (CECPP) Partnership, she is currently leading a team to enhance and expand Early Childhood Education pathways for the incumbent workforce. She regularly presents her work at national conferences and as an invited speaker at local conferences and is past-President of the Illinois Association for Early Childhood Teacher Educators (ILAECTE) and a member of the board for Chicago Youth Centers.

Christi Chadwick M.Ed. & M.P.P.

Project Director, Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity, Illinois Board of Higher Education

Christi has spent over 25 years focused on advancing high-quality early learning opportunities for young children, particularly those from under-resourced communities. She currently serves as the Project Director for the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity, an initiative to support seamless higher education pathways and opportunities and supports for the early childhood workforce to access and complete credentials and degrees. Prior to her work at IBHE, Christi worked in roles in Colorado and Illinois where she focused developing, strengthening, and better compensating the early childhood workforce in positions such as Workforce Development Policy Director in the Illinois Governor's Office for Early Childhood Development and Early Learning Policy Director in the City of Chicago Mayor's Office, where, among other things, she directed the start-up of the Chicago Early Learning Workforce Scholarship, designed to provide funding and wrap around supports for increased higher education access and completion. Additionally, Christi worked in higher education, serving as District Director for Child Development at City Colleges of Chicago, where she led the restructuring of five urban child development laboratory centers and supported academic programs to become NAEYC accredited. Christi began her career teaching kindergarten and has experience teaching college and mentoring student teachers. Christi received her bachelor's and master's in early childhood education from the University of North Texas, and her master's of public policy from the Harris School at the University of Chicago, where she was an Irving B. Harris Child and Family Policy Fellow.

Diane Schael, Ed.D.

Chair, Early Childhood, College of Lake County

Diane Schael has had the privilege to support young children's learning for over 35 years. Her experience in early childhood education began as a teacher's assistant while obtaining her Bachelor's Degree in Child Development. She continued her educational journey obtaining a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education and a Doctoral Degree in Early Childhood Curriculum and Instruction, both from Northern Illinois University. She also obtained a certification in Educational Leadership from Roosevelt University. She has taught preschool, kindergarten and first grade students and has administered childcare facilities both locally and internationally. She is currently the chair of the early childhood department at the College of Lake County. She enjoys supporting the next generation of high-quality early childhood professionals.

Eric Lichtenberger, Ph.D

Deputy Director for Information Management and Research, Illinois Board of Higher Education

Eric Lichtenberger is the Deputy Director for Information Management and Research at the Illinois Board of Higher Education. He also serves as IBHE's Chief Information Officer and oversees IBHE's component of the Illinois Longitudinal Data System. Before joining IBHE, he worked at the Illinois Education Research Council which was housed at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Throughout his career he has conducted numerous studies using a wide variety of research methods. Although Eric furthered his graduate education at Virginia Tech, he is originally from Illinois and has earned degrees at Triton College and Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

Ginger Ostro

Illinois Board of Higher Education

Ginger Ostro brings extensive policy and finance leadership to the Illinois Board of Higher Education. She previously served as interim Chief Financial Officer and Vice-President of Financial Operations at Chicago State University. Earlier in her career, she served as Deputy Executive Director at the Illinois Student Assistance Commission and as Director of the Office of Budget Planning at Governors State University. Ginger served as Executive Director of Advance Illinois as it helped architect the successful effort to fix the nation's least-equitable K12 funding formula. She played a lead role as budget director and CFO at Chicago Public Schools in developing and implementing a more equitable system of allocating funding across schools as well as managing the district's \$6 billion operating budget and the capital budget. Ginger also served in several roles in state government, including over six years at the Governor's Office of Management and Budget, where she rose to director.

Since joining IBHE in February 2020, she has led the agency's response to the COVID-19 pandemic; worked with other agencies and stakeholders to develop a strategic plan for Illinois higher education, A Thriving Illinois; and is currently working on multiple new initiatives, including the Equitable Public University Funding and the Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity.

Ginger holds a BA in Politics, Economics, Rhetoric, and Law from the University of Chicago and a Master's in Public Policy, Health, and Human Services from Harvard's Kennedy School. She lives in Chicago.

Jamilah R. Jor'dan, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development

Jamilah R. Jor'dan, Ph.D. serves as the executive director of the Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development (GOECD). In this role, she supports the development and implementation of early childhood policy across multiple state agencies. Dr. Jor'dan has over 35 years of experience in the field of early care and education and has served in various leadership and service positions.

She started her career in Head Start as an assistant executive director. She has served as the accreditation project director and interim executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Association for the Education of Young Children (Chicago Metro AEYC). Dr. Jor'dan was president of the Partnership for Quality Child Care, a \$16 million-dollar public private partnership that supported a city-wide accreditation facilitation initiative in Chicago that provided assistance to both center-based and family child care providers. Chicago achieved national recognition for the largest number of early childhood programs serving children and families in Chicago's lower income communities that attained accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Dr. Jor'dan is past vice-president of the governing board of NAEYC. She has served as a consultant for Strengthening Families Illinois through the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. She co-chaired the Family Specialist Credential Committee as part of Gateways to Opportunity, Illinois Professional Development System that acknowledges contributions of professionals who provide responsive relationship-based services to families.

Jason A. Helfer, Ph.D.

Deputy Officer for Instructional Education, Illinois State Board of Education

Dr. Jason Helfer is Deputy Officer for Instructional Education at the Illinois State Board of Education. Prior to this, he was an associate professor and department chair at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. Dr. Helfer has taught at Millikin University and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He was also an elementary school teacher in Evanston, Illinois and Grapevine-Colleyville, Texas.

Dr. Jennifer Kirmes

***Deputy Executive Director of Teaching and Learning,
Illinois State Board of Education***

Jennifer Kirmes is the Executive Director of Teaching & Learning for the Illinois State Board of Education where she leads ISBE's efforts to strengthen and diversify the educator workforce, expand access to quality career and technical education, and develop professional learning and instructional resources to support the effective implementation of the Illinois Learning Standards. Prior to joining ISBE staff, Dr. Kirmes served as Principal & CEO of Amandla Charter School for six years and before that, was Principal of Bowen High School in Chicago Public Schools. In her school and district leadership roles, she was known for fostering teacher leadership, dramatically improving school culture and student on-track rates, and supporting students to achieve district-leading college enrollment and persistence rates. Throughout her career, she has demonstrated commitment to ensuring excellent educational outcomes for all students and a passion for achieving educational justice.

Johnna Darragh-Ernst, Ph.D.

***Professor of Early Childhood Education, Heartland
Community College***

Johnna Darragh-Ernst, Ph.D., is a Distinguished Professor of Early Childhood Education at Heartland Community College. She has participated in the development and implementation of competencies statewide and within her institution of employment. She is the author, co-editor, and co-author of four books, including "The Competency Development Process Model" which is currently in press. Johnna's other books and presentations focus on supporting children and families who are culturally, linguistically and ability diverse in inclusive early childhood classroom communities. Johnna is currently a member of several Illinois state and national committees focused on early childhood professional preparation and inclusion and is currently the tri-chair of the Illinois Professional Development Advisory Council.

Joni Scritchlow, M.S.

Senior Director, INCCRRA (Gateways to Opportunity)

Joni Scritchlow is Senior Director of Professional Opportunities & Development at Illinois Network of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (INCCRRA) in Bloomington, IL. For the past decade, Joni has played a key role in the development and implementation of Gateways to Opportunity® Illinois Professional Development System. Joni has helped advance innovations in professional development while building critical local and state networks to strengthen and support services to children and families. She convenes and coordinates a range of state committees and work groups on behalf of agencies and philanthropic organizations in Illinois. Joni has administered a number of federal and state programs in her work at nonprofit agencies over the last 40 years and is committed to excellence and innovative thinking.

Kamilah Wilson, M.A.

***ECE Assistant Professor, Competency-Based Program
Manager, National Louis University***

Kamilah Wilson holds a Master's degree in Child Development and an Ed.S in Early Childhood Education. At National Louis University, she is an ECE Assistant Professor, and Competency-Based Program Manager. Kamilah is the creator of the Competency Coffee Shop a community practice for students enrolled in the program. The Competency Coffee Shop is a virtual weekly community of practice that meets every Wednesday evening. Students enrolled in the program meet with instructors and gather with their peers in the program. Also, she was one of the faculty authors that participated in developing and revising the Illinois Director Credential modules. Currently, she serves as the Governance Co-Chair for Undergraduate College at National Louis University.

Karen Yarbrough

***Senior Early Childhood Policy Advisor, Illinois
Department of Human Services***

Karen is serving as the Senior Early Childhood Policy Advisor for the Division of Early Childhood at the Illinois Department of Human Services. Prior to joining the Division of Early Childhood in January of 2022, Karen was an independent consultant providing expertise on early childhood development and education service systems, and social justice oriented public policy and advocacy. Karen's career has focused at the intersection of research, policy, and practice – helping organizations incorporate research-based practices; ensuring that public policy is responsive to current research; and advocating for adequate public funding to support the needs of young children and their families. She has over 20 years of experience building and managing strong partnerships across the public and private sectors.

Karen was schooled in early childhood education and child development at Start Early (formerly the Ounce of Prevention Fund) where she worked for 13 years within the Illinois Policy and National Policy Divisions. She lives Oak Park, Illinois with her three boys where she has made her home after enjoying an upbringing that ranged from America's south to Europe and the Middle East.

Lindsay Meeker, Ed.D.

***Professor and Director of the Center for Best Practices
in Early Childhood, Western Illinois University***

Dr. Meeker is a visiting professor in the early childhood program and Director of the Center for Best Practices in Early Childhood at Western Illinois University where she has been an adjunct instructor in Early Childhood, ESL/Bilingual and Curriculum and Instruction in the school of Education. Her previous roles included director of multilingual learners in the Wheaton/Warrenville school district, and a teacher of multilingual learners in the Moline School District.

Marcela Calderon Duran

Early Childhood Spanish Instructor, College of Lake County

Marcela Calderon Duran was born in Cd. Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. She was raised in the Mexican/American border and considers herself to be bicultural. She is currently serving the Lake County Community as an Early Childhood Spanish Instructor. Prior to this, she served as an assistant principal at an Early Childhood Development Center in Texas with a focus on English/Spanish/Mandarin. She also served as the program coordinator for the only Dual Language Gifted and Talented program in Texas.

She is passionate about dismantling language inequities, providing high academic excellence, and helping to create safe learning spaces for all to succeed.

Marcus Brown, Ph.D.

Deputy Director for Academic Affairs & Student Success, Illinois Community College Board

Marcus Brown, Ph.D., is the Deputy Director for Academic Affairs and Student Success at the Illinois Community College Board. In this role, he is responsible for Overall administration of the Academic Affairs and Student Success Division including the approval of new units of instruction, new courses and reasonable and moderate extensions for both occupation and transfer disciplines, Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI) and other articulation issues, teacher preparation, early childhood education, student services and supports, the Student Advisory Committee, and special studies related to instruction programs and/or accountability. He also works with dual credit, Transitional Instruction, student services, and works with diversity and inclusion efforts and other college and career readiness initiatives.

In addition, Marcus has over 25 years of experience working in different aspects of higher learning. He has worked in recruitment and school relations, articulation, counseling and career services, student accommodations, and been a faculty member. He is a board-certified counselor. He obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Quincy University, a Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology from the University of Connecticut, a Master of Business Administration from Millikin University, and his Ph.D. from the Chicago School of Professional Psychology.

Marie Ann Donovan, Ed.D.

Associate Professor, DePaul University

Marie Ann Donovan, Ed.D. is an associate professor of teacher education and directs the Early Childhood Education Program at DePaul University in Chicago. She anchors preservice teacher courses in reading instruction and children's literature. She serves as an associate editor for the Illinois Reading Council Journal and as a member of the Faculty Advisory Council to the Illinois Board of Higher Education. Her research interests include assessment of workplace-based learning and classroom teacher-school librarian connectivity.

Melissa Clucas Walter, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, Northern Illinois University

Melissa ClucasWalter holds a B.S. in Early Childhood Education and a Master's and Ph.D. in Human Development and Family Studies. She is currently an assistant professor of Human Development and Family Sciences with an emphasis in Child Development at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois. Melissa is passionate about preparing early childhood professionals, and her research focuses on supporting caregiver-child interactions in both home and early childhood settings. Melissa served as a faculty fellow on the Illinois Director's Credential, was one of the faculty authors of the ECE competency-based modules, led the pilot of ECE modules at NIU, implemented ITC modules, and was a faculty reviewer of the Illinois Director Credential modules.

Rebecca Vonderlack-Navarro, Ph.D.

Director of Education Policy and Research, Latino Policy Forum

Dr. Rebecca Vonderlack-Navarro directs the Forum's Education department. The vision of the education department is that Latinos and English Learners from early childhood through 12th grade receive equitable educational opportunities leading to economic prosperity. To accomplish this, Rebecca leads a team that concentrates its efforts on promoting quality bilingual education programming, equitable access to early childhood programming that is responsive to language and cultural difference, and quality parent engagement. Rebecca's publications and advocacy efforts provide thoughtful consideration about the interconnectedness of language, literacy, and academic achievement. Her advocacy efforts are greatly concentrated on dealing with the vast shortage of qualified bilingual and bicultural educators across Illinois. Rebecca is a state-appointed member of the Illinois Advisory Council on Bilingual Education.

Stephanie A. Bernoteit, Ed.D.

Executive Deputy Director, Illinois Board of Higher Education

Dr. Stephanie Bernoteit serves as Executive Deputy Director at the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE). She oversees the agency's regulatory and consumer protection work with approximately 450 postsecondary institutions and is responsible for the agency's initiatives to promote postsecondary student success, including coordination of state efforts to advance developmental education reform and implementation of a statewide transfer infrastructure. Stephanie is a member of the Illinois Early Learning Council and serves on the board of directors of the Competency-Based Education Network. She began her professional career as a Kindergarten teacher and was subsequently involved in national work to board certify educators through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

Stephanie holds a doctorate in education from Illinois State University, a graduate certificate in non-profit leadership from Georgetown University, a graduate certificate in fundraising management from Indiana University, a master's degree in education from Drake University, and a bachelor's degree in elementary education with an emphasis in early childhood from Northwest Missouri State University. Dr. Bernoteit can be reached at bernoteit@ibhe.org.

Stephanie Santos-Gray, MA

Associate Dean, College of Lake County

Stephanie holds a MA in clinical psychology and has more than 20 years' experience in higher education administration. Stephanie is the Associate Dean for the Early Childhood program at College of Lake County.

Zach Petrea, M.S.

Professor of English, Heartland Community College

Zach Petrea is a Professor of English and the Study Abroad Coordinator at Heartland Community College in Normal, Illinois. In his 17 years at Heartland Community College he has advocated for program development and assessment through roles as Chair of the Curriculum Committee, Writing Program Coordinator, and Dual Credit Coordinator for the Liberal Arts & Social Sciences. These experiences have been brought to bear on his recent professional work in advocating for student access to international education through his roles as Study Abroad Coordinator and Co-Chair of the Committee for Global Education.