The federal "No Child Left Behind" legislation requires that thousands of preschool teachers across the U.S. must complete an associate degree within the next 5 years. In order to address the professional development needs of preschool teachers, Arizona has implemented a training system across community colleges that involves coursework and mentoring. This poster highlights the development and outcomes of the virtual mentoring and support community that has been implemented across the state as a cornerstone of this project.

As part of Arizona’s statewide effort to support preschool teachers in meeting their professional development needs, community colleges have partnered across the state to align coursework and fieldwork requirements as well as accessibilty for early childhood teachers. This program is entitled “Arizona System Ready: Child Ready” and provides pathways for 300 preschool teachers to complete the college credits needed for their degrees. One of the most important components of student retention in this program is an on-going interactive support system. Research literature in teacher training emphasizes the need for personalized support for these non-traditional students in terms of academic support, study skills support, and support in translating coursework into their everyday classrooms routines. As many of the preschool teachers enrolled in this program live and work in isolated rural areas, it is necessary to develop support that is meaningful over the miles. In view of these needs, we developed a virtual learning community for our program participants. This interactive community has grown in anticipated and unexpected ways. Our support system started with a traditional “project overview” website format designed for informational purposes coupled with physical site visits that were costly in terms of time, mileage, and intrusiveness. We have evolved in our concept of a more effective and interactive support system that, for example, includes a virtual Coffee Shop for our students to virtually nosh and chat with friends about college and work issues, an interactive “Ask Ms Mentor” feature (akin to “Dear Abby”) for our students to query any number of issues specific to their experience with the System Ready: Child Ready program, a College Math for Women online support group, and links to Financial Aid, the Registrar’s Office, College Advisors, Instructors, Librarians, and other “official” gatekeepers and gate-openers that are a part of college life.

This poster session will highlight these and other components of our site, including its conception, gestation, delivery, and infancy. We will describe its developmental milestones as well as its developmental delays. In learning what this site means to our program participants, we have analyzed emerging themes discovered in focus group interviews as well as participants’ reflection papers and instructor reactions. These analyses, as well as our emerging conceptual understanding of the meaning and value of virtual communities, will be included in this poster presentation. We hope to have an opportunity to interact with conference attendees from other programs who have used virtual communities to support students in professional development programs. We hope to share our experiences with other educators and to gain insights about the possible extensions and revisions that could be made to our virtual community. We are particularly interested in exploring recruitment and retention successes that other programs have had in using this approach to working with non-traditional adult learners.