The (New) Bachelor

BY NARCISA A. POLONIO AND NORMA GOLDSTEIN
THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE BACCALAUREATE DEGREE IS rapidly increasing in popularity throughout the country in response to unmet industry needs, limited opportunities for students and workers due to geographic isolation, affordability issues, and state mandates to address specific state-based shortages. Applied baccalaureate degrees at community colleges attract working adults and traditional students for many reasons, among them providing career growth, proximity to home and family, flexible time offerings, ease of transfer for associate degree holders with no loss of credits, and cost effectiveness.

“Offering what the community needs has gone on for years,” said Beth Hagan, executive director of the Community College Baccalaureate Association (CCBA). “Community colleges are headed in the same direction in meeting local workforce needs, using the degrees and programs to do that.”

Governing boards should be cognizant of this trend and its impact on community colleges, as well as have a familiarity with the differences between a traditional baccalaureate degree and community college baccalaureates. They must also consider whether incorporating bachelor’s degree programs constitutes a fundamental shift in the mission of community colleges or an extension of the mission.

In this article, we provide a brief overview of the status and growth of community college baccalaureate programs throughout the country.

The Current Landscape
As of June 2015, CCBA reports that 79 community colleges in 17 states confer approximately 400 baccalaureate degrees each year. As upper-level extensions of their own associate degree programs, community college bachelor's degree programs typically cover market-driven technical fields. According to Hagan, states have been conferring bachelor's degrees at community colleges for many years for multiple reasons, including local industry need, the nation’s health care crisis, teacher shortages, the need for professional credentialing, and the technological revolution. Other compelling reasons include reduced taxpayer costs and overcrowding at four-year colleges. In addition, demand comes from more isolated geographical regions or rural areas where universities are not nearby and workforce preparation is needed.
Not Your Traditional Bachelor’s

Community college baccalaureate degrees differ from traditional university degree offerings in the liberal arts and sciences because they are developed with a professional field in mind: energy, public safety, education, agriculture, business, and digital media, to name a few. In 2014, key findings from a Texas Rand Corporation Study about unmet workforce needs requiring a baccalaureate degree included nursing, information technology, fire sciences, production/operations technicians, and health information technology. The most common degrees are the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN), Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS), and Bachelor of Science (BS) degrees.

New applied baccalaureate programs are developed as new technologies emerge in the workplace. Recently, Truckee Meadows Community College in Nevada started two new baccalaureates to accommodate the needs of Tesla Motors and other high-tech companies moving into the region. Florida’s Broward College and Polk State College now offer bachelor’s degrees in supply chain management and aerospace sciences, respectively. The Florida College System offers 175 applied baccalaureates at 24 colleges and reports that, in many cases, business and industry partners reach out to the college in their area to develop baccalaureate programs that fulfill a specific training need.

In California, An Expanded Role

Proponents of community college baccalaureates see these applied degrees as an extension of meeting a core community college mission — workforce education. Brice Harris, chancellor of the California Community College System, explains that this expanded role for community colleges was part of implementing the state’s master plan for higher education. “As with California State University offering postgraduate degrees, it’s normal to have a transition in mission for an educational system as large as ours is,” Harris says.

Across the country, more community colleges and state legislatures are contemplating offering baccalaureate degrees, California being the most recent. Legislators there passed a law in 2014 that allocates resources for applied baccalaureates to be developed at 15 colleges in 12 different program areas with unmet workforce needs. “We see a real potential for these applied baccalaureate degrees over the next decade,” Harris says. “If industry wants more credentials, we expect more colleges in California to become engaged. We are a large state and might see dozens of thousands of students in these programs over the long haul.”

California plans degrees in high-demand programs such as dental hygiene, equine studies, agriculture, mortuary science, respiratory therapy, health information, automotive technology, and interactive design. According to Paul Feist, the California system’s vice chancellor for communications, “there is a huge public appetite for this. We took proposals from the colleges and tried to have both urban and rural areas represented.”

Accreditation Not a Stumbling Block

In most states, conferring the baccalaureate at a community college requires state legislative approval and acceptance of a substantive change request by a regional accrediting agency. Citing the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Chancellor Harris indicated that several California colleges have their substantive change proposals into the commission, and others are working on them. “Like any other bleeding-edge innovation, getting approvals is fraught with challenges,” Harris says. “However, we expect all of the 15 colleges to meet their deadlines successfully and to have some baccalaureate offerings by fall 2016.”

It is always important to look at institutions and states where lessons have been learned from allowing community colleges to confer the baccalaureate credential. With the experience of 17 colleges conferring 35 applied baccalaureate degrees and nine more planned, Washington state offers many lessons learned for governing boards. An accreditation specialist from the Pacific Northwest and current CCBA board member, Ron Baker says that the approved applied bachelor’s degrees are focused on principles of accreditation particularly as they relate to rigor, library resources, adequately prepared faculty, and an appropriate level and amount of general education for skill development in an applied field.

Costs and Implications to Consider

Costing a fraction of public or private university degrees, bachelor’s degrees at a local community college address a region’s economic development needs and save students thousands of dollars, not a small factor given the skyrocketing costs of higher education. Nevertheless, it is extremely
important for any college contemplating offering baccalaureate degrees to consider the costs and implications of such expansion. In addition to the time and costs of meeting the dictates for regional accreditation and state approvals, as well as personnel and planning considerations, expenses could include the legal and implementation costs of changing the college logo and stationery, launching a public relations campaign for the local community and alumni, and increasing library resources, as well as updating college publications, websites, and media. Faculty credentials to offer these higher level degrees come under scrutiny, and new collective bargaining agreements need to be forged. Curriculums need to be developed, and for many highly technical baccalaureate programs, specialized equipment purchased and installed. A major implication is that these changes include significant cultural shifts within the college.

Meeting Employer Needs

Industry analysts currently predict a shortage of 11 million workers with the intellectual and technical skills to perform complex tasks. One way in which states are addressing employer demands in their communities is by allowing local colleges to confer applied baccalaureate degrees. “Gone is the artificial barrier of a terminal degree at the end of two years. There is a real advantage to this model; students graduate highly prepared. Employers see the value of these degrees,” says Nancy Dick, director of workforce programs in Washington state. “Instead of importing our talent, we grow our own. There is a gap, and we need to provide this education. Workforce education’s time has come.”

Chancellor Harris says that industry supported the applied baccalaureates for California’s community colleges. “Our system had an internal task force for a year, and the manufacturing and health care industries were hand-in-hand with the colleges to push for these baccalaureates,” Harris says. “Community colleges are at the forefront of change and are addressing what the marketplace needs. We are meeting the demands of the workplace.”

ACCT will follow up with another article in this series on the trends and policy implications of implementing community college applied baccalaureate programs with topics such as legislative restrictions, charges of “mission creep,” and competition with universities that college governing boards contemplating such a change for their institutions should consider.

States with high numbers of bachelor’s programs conferred at community colleges

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th># Colleges</th>
<th># Baccalaureate programs at ccs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>175</td>
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<td>Washington</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>California (planning stage)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
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Resources:

For further reading on community college baccalaureate and applied baccalaureate programs:


Update on the Community College Baccalaureate: Evolving Trends and Issues, a higher education policy brief by Alene Russell, Senior State Policy Consultant for AASCU, October 2010.

Achieving the Baccalaureate Through the Community College by Deborah Floyd, chapter 6 of New Directions for Community Colleges, no. 135, Fall 2006, Wiley Periodicals, Inc. (Published online in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com).

The Applied Baccalaureate: What We Know, What We Learned, and What We Need to Know, Collin Ruud and Debra Bragg, Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, May 2011.


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