Early History of Conferring Baccalaureate Degrees by Community Colleges

(How many states have baccalaureate degrees in their community colleges?)

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“How many states have baccalaureate degrees in their community colleges?” is a question that those affiliated with the Community College Baccalaureate Association (CCBA) have been asked hundreds of times. The answer seems simple but never before has been more complicated to answer accurately.

Counting States with Community Colleges that Confer Baccalaureate Degrees

The challenge of answering the question of how many states allow four-year degrees in their community colleges is in the determination of exactly what to count. Does the degree need to be active to be counted? Does a state that has approved a degree but never developed one qualify? What happens when the higher education system changes, and the college is no longer a “community college”? Westark Community College, approved to offer four-year degrees in 1998, became the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith in 2002 and is now offering primarily baccalaureate degrees. How does one count Arkansas or states like it that did confer baccalaureate degrees in a community college but no longer do because of reorganization?

Should New Mexico be included? Northern New Mexico Community College was renamed Northern New Mexico College and is approved to offer four-year degrees in all subjects. While still associate degree dominant, NMC is considered to be a “four-year college.” Should New Mexico be counted? How does one count a state like Idaho that has had the statutory authority to confer since the authorization of their community college system but has never developed a baccalaureate program?

How does one count a state like Minnesota that sought and gained the authority to confer but has never developed a degree? Does a state that has only a few students in one program in one college really count? Where do Technical Colleges like Delaware Technical Community College that has a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program, fit in?

New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology is technically a community college but is no longer associate degree dominant. It has had bachelor’s programs since 1975, master’s programs since 1979 and now doctoral degrees. Does it count? The answer to the question “How many states have bachelor’s degrees?” is not simple.

Counting States that Have Approved Baccalaureate Degrees

The answer to the question, “How many states have approved at least one bachelor’s program in one community college?” is easily answerable. Twenty-three (23) states have granted the authority at some point in time. This tally includes the states that have approval but never developed degrees and colleges or systems that have changed their structure (Idaho, Minnesota, Arkansas, Utah and Georgia).

If one counts New York’s Fashion Institute, it can be said that at least one community college has had the authority to confer bachelor’s degrees since the mid 1970’s, but it was not until 1989 when the community
college component of the West Virginia University at Parkersburg (formerly Parkersburg Community College) approved the conferring of baccalaureate degrees that real activity became evident.

Community college administrators began to recognize the growing need for applied baccalaureate degrees in their communities during the 1990’s. Programs were developed during that decade in Utah, Vermont, Georgia, Arkansas, and Nevada. Additional degrees were approved from 2000 until 2010 in Louisiana, Florida, Hawaii, Indiana, North Dakota, Minnesota, New Mexico, Texas, Washington, Oklahoma, Colorado and Texas. Since 2010, four states, Michigan, Wisconsin, California and Delaware, have approved a variety of degrees.

**The Early Demand**

The demand for the early programs was evident in particular geographic areas and in high demand fields of healthcare, education and technology. By 2005, there were 44 degree programs being offered in 13 colleges in 7 states. Of the 44 degrees, 18 were in education, 14 were technology oriented and 8 were healthcare related.

The reasons for the development of these degrees in community colleges, especially in the early years, fall primarily into three categories:

- Some two-year institutions saw this as an opportunity to satisfy the responsibility of community colleges to provide access to baccalaureate education in areas where it was not previously available, especially in regions that were geographically remote.
- Some viewed the degrees as a cost-effective way to increase baccalaureate access versus the more expensive university option.
- Some saw community college programs as an opportunity to provide targeted programming that produced graduates in labor shortage areas such as nursing, elementary education or to meet the specific needs of a local employer.

Liberal Arts degrees have never been part of the mix.

In 2017, there are approximately 90 community colleges with more than 700 active degree programs in 19 states. There are now hundreds of degrees that can be characterized as applied, workforce-related degrees in disciplines and subjects that are as diverse as the community colleges that offer them.

**The Demand Niche**

It is more difficult to place the current degrees in three categories. The early needs for teacher education, technology and healthcare are still apparent, but offerings have widened and deepened. The reasons for the more recent degrees focus on the workforce with degree designations that represent local needs in what might be considered niches of specific demand for that district or state, for example:

- BAS in Health Promotion Management – Washington
- BS in Respiratory Care - California
- BS in Land Surveying/Geomatics – Nevada
- BAS in Multimedia Video Production – Florida
- BS in Forest Resource Management – Washington
- BAT in Medical and Health Services Management – Texas
- BS in Equine Studies – Vermont
- BT in Emergency Responder Administration – Oklahoma.
Applied baccalaureates

Today’s degrees are primarily applied baccalaureates that incorporate applied associate courses and degrees that were once considered as “terminal.” The second two years provide students with advanced technical knowledge and skills such as higher-level thinking. The second two years build on the learning of the first and are not simply the addition of 60 credit hours.

The Conferring Process

The path to allowing even one community college to offer a four-year degree has not been easy. Leaders in several states have worked for years to convince their legislators that this option is part of the natural evolution of the community college system, a system that was developed to meet the everchanging needs of local communities.

In 2005, Arizona came close to winning approval when the House passed a bill that would have allowed 10 community colleges to confer degrees in teacher education, health professions and other workforce-related disciplines. The bill was defeated in the Senate appropriations committee. Also in 2005, after years of debate, the Illinois Board of Higher Education rejected a proposal to pilot a four-year degree program. In 2009, Illinois adopted an alternative approach of collaboration with universities, but in 2017, the discussion in Illinois continues.

The Bachelor of Science in Nursing

Debates in the early years of the baccalaureate movement in community colleges focused on issues of mission; affordability; and impact upon college faculty, resources and campus culture. Debates today are more specific to areas of study, especially in health care and most visibly in nursing.

Today, the debate in states that currently permit conferring and those that do not focus some of their attention on a countrywide need for nurses with bachelor degrees, the Bachelor of Science in Nursing – BSN. This is the result of The Institute of Medicine’s 2010 report on “The Future of Nursing.” This report made a strong recommendation that 80% of the nursing workforce have a baccalaureate degree (BSN) by 2020. At the time of the report's release, only 50% of the nursing workforce had a BSN. Now, there is an estimated 55% – 60% of nurses who have such a degree.

Community colleges educate more than half of the entry level nurses in the United States. It is during these first two years of training that clinical experiences are coordinated and supervised and when expensive equipment is needed for instruction and practice. It has been said that the costs of educating nurses are borne by the institutions in the first two year but the second two years can be delivered on line at far less expense.

There are currently 10 states conferring the BSN in their community colleges. These baccalaureate degrees are usually for Registered Nurses (RN) who have an associate degree and are employed. There are no four-year degree programs in community colleges.
Myths and Realities

The early years of this movement generated a number of popular myths about what conferring baccalaureate degrees would mean for the future of community colleges as we know them. The myths became so common that the CCBA Board of Directors commissioned a publication titled “Baccalaureate Degrees in Community Colleges: Myth and Reality.” It is useful in understanding the early history of this movement to review a few of the myths that were prevalent fifteen years ago:

➢ **Myth:** Conferring baccalaureate degrees in community colleges will cause community colleges to try to become full-fledged four-year institutions.
  ● **Reality 15 years later:** Although some statewide systems have changed, their reorganizations have not been the result of community colleges desiring to become four-year. One exception is Northern New Mexico College that is authorized to offer four-year degrees in all subjects because of geographic remoteness.

➢ **Myth:** Community Colleges must have the word “Community” in their school’s name if it is be recognized as a true Community College.
  ● **Reality 15 years later:** Many community colleges including those that do not confer four-year degrees have changed their names for a variety of reasons. They still consider themselves to be community colleges. In Florida, where virtually all the community colleges confer baccalaureate degrees, maintaining the community college mission is a component of the authorizing legislation.

➢ **Myth:** Community Colleges that are conferring their own baccalaureate degrees are trying to take away the college’s main focus on core community mission. The campus culture will change.
  ● **Reality 15 years later:** Most of the degrees offered are serving a small number of students in specific fields. With one exception, the number of students in most states does not exceed two to four percent of the total enrollment. In Florida in 2015, the state that could be described has having a well-established bachelor’s program throughout their community college system, had 4.6% of enrollees participating in bachelor’s degree programs.

➢ **Myth:** Community Colleges are only two-year colleges and do not offer post-baccalaureate educational programs.
  ● **Reality 15 years later:** Community Colleges have been offering post associate degree training almost from their very beginning. These programs include teacher certification, allied health, legal studies, technology training and fire studies. Workforce and applied baccalaureates are now necessary and valid credentials to prepare students for the workforce and to retrain workers for employment in high demand fields, a core community college mission.

Still a Challenge

Answering the question, “How many community colleges have baccalaureate degrees?” is still a challenge to answer accurately. What we do know is that there will be many more colleges in additional states who will choose this path to meet the needs of their communities.