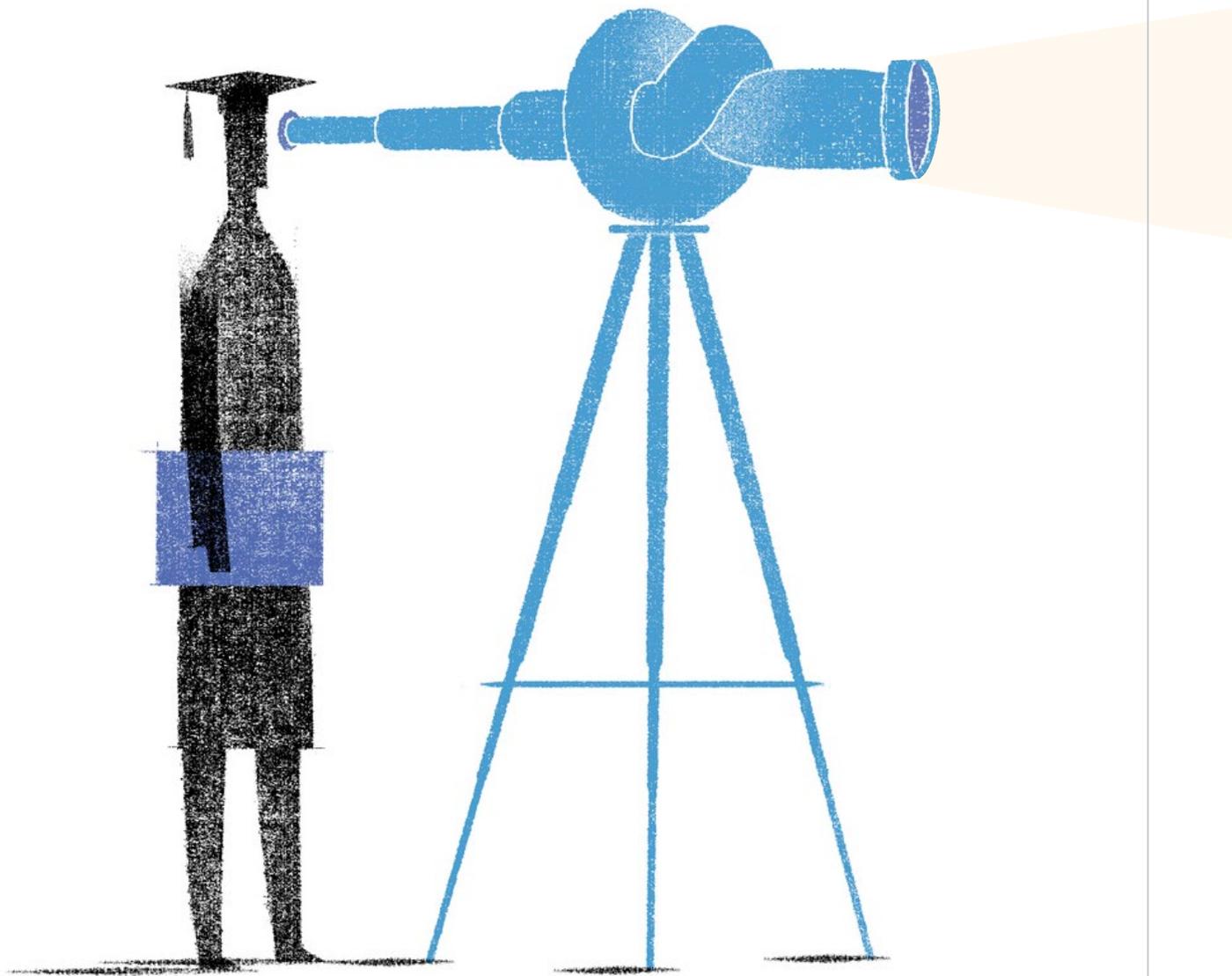


THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE BACCALAUREATE

MISSION CREEP OR MISSION FOCUSED?

BY J. NOAH BROWN



ACCT SUPPORTS POLICIES THAT ALLOW LOCAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE BOARDS, THROUGH THEIR MISSION AND POLICY-SETTING ROLE, TO WORK COLLABORATIVELY TO CONFER BACCALAUREATE DEGREES THAT ARE DESIGNED TO RESPOND TO LOCAL, REGIONAL, AND NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL AND WORKFORCE NEEDS.

MY FIRST REAL EXPOSURE TO THE ISSUE OF WHETHER community colleges should offer baccalaureate degrees came during the formulation of the *New Expeditions* project, a joint effort of the American Association of Community Colleges and ACCT in 2000, examining the new millennium's opportunities and challenges. At that time the issue was relatively controversial, with advocates and opponents occupying opposing trenches in the community college landscape.

Now, almost 20 years later, roughly 100 community colleges across 17 states offer baccalaureates, primarily in applied fields where shortages of skilled workers hamper economic development and social mobility.

Workforce Needs

What's driving the community college baccalaureate movement? It is estimated that the U.S. needs to raise degree attainment for 25-to-34-year-olds from 39 percent to 60 percent to meet employer demand. Currently, the U.S. stands at just under 48 percent. We may not reach the 60 percent goal until 2041, according to the Educational Testing Service (ETS).

And despite longstanding calls to increase degree attainment to ensure the nation's global competitiveness, America remains stuck in 13th place globally, according to the Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD).

Furthermore, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimates there are 6.8 million Americans looking for work and nearly 6 million unfilled jobs — a mismatch that represents a pervasive and vexing problem for our economy, particularly as we will need millions of additional workers as Baby Boomers retire over the next decade.

Degrees and Social Mobility

Despite our best intentions and large-scale investments in education and training, the equity gap in higher education persists and is not narrowing. On average, white and Asian students earn a college-level credential at a rate at least 9 percentage points higher than do their Hispanic and African American peers, according to Census data.

Increasing equitable degree attainment will be more urgent in the coming years when college enrollment across all postsecondary institutions will slow down — rising by only 1.14 percent through 2022, about one-third the pace of the past decade, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). To compound matters, the number of high

school graduates will decline by 2022, while racial and ethnic diversity increases. This suggests the equity gap will expand, not narrow, if we do not innovate around pathways leading to degree attainment.

Millions of working people feel disconnected from our economy and social and political institutions — they no longer believe that they and their children will be better off than previous generations. Work by Harvard economist Raj Chetty suggests that “children born in 1940 had a 90 percent chance of earning more than their parents, but for children born four decades later, that chance had fallen to 50 percent, a toss of a coin.” (“The Economist Who Would Fix the American Dream,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 2019).

To drive this point home, median weekly earnings for associate degree holders is \$836, while bachelor's degree holders earn \$1,173, according to the BLS. Degrees matter to earnings and economic mobility.

On the flip side, the unemployment rate for bachelor's degree holders is 2.5 percent; compared to 3.5 percent for associate degree holders and nearly 4 percent for those with no postsecondary degree.

Affirming the Role of Boards

Since 1972, ACCT has worked to increase the capacity of governing boards as policymakers and leading voices in their communities. Specifically, we believe community colleges exist:

To promote and offer high quality and affordable higher education, cutting-edge workforce and development training, student success, and the opportunity for all individuals to achieve economic self-sufficiency and security.

—ACCT Mission Statement

More recently, the ACCT Board revisited the issue of baccalaureate degrees and adopted a new policy statement: *ACCT supports the Community College Baccalaureate degree as a higher education offering that can support local, regional, and national goals for a more educated and prepared workforce. ACCT supports policies that allow local community college boards, through their mission and policy-setting role, to work collaboratively to confer Baccalaureate degrees that are designed to respond to local, regional, and national educational and workforce needs.*

—ACCT Board of Directors, February 10, 2019

The policy statement was designed to affirm both the value and focus of baccalaureate degrees and reassert the primacy of boards in making decisions based upon the needs of the communities they serve. The ACCT Board, as representatives of our member boards, declared the community college baccalaureate degree is consistent with the mission of community colleges.

Mission Focused When . . .

Throughout the history of community colleges, boards have promoted educational access and sought to address the equity gap for populations historically underrepresented in higher education. As noted earlier, closing the equity gap requires that we innovate around pathways leading to degree attainment.

A new focus on access to an affordable baccalaureate degree, and increasingly, to a technical and/or applied baccalaureate degree being demanded by industry, aligns with the need to rebuild and empower the middle class.

Beginning around 2010, boosting completion and degree attainment have emerged as “job one” throughout the community college sector. Creating applied and alternative pathways to the baccalaureate degree comports fully with this mission and our responsibility to strengthen local, regional, and national economies.

Offering baccalaureate degrees is mission focused when there are strong and demonstrable connections to workforce needs and reducing skills shortages results. I and others have often adopted the parlance of “degrees of relevance” as a construct for ensuring degree offerings correlate to labor force and economic needs.

Similarly, increased global competitiveness and economic sufficiency should be paramount design considerations when instituting baccalaureate degree programs. This fits seamlessly with the overall value proposition of community colleges to provide both an on-ramp to higher education and further economic mobility.

And affordable and demonstrable ROI for students and taxpayers should be realized and measurable so that boards can monitor and fulfill their primary responsibilities as stewards and trustees of individual and collective assets.

Not Mission Focused When . . .

Experience suggests that we depart from our mission when degrees are not relevant to workforce or career needs. Boards must navigate tough choices among competing priorities and demands, and if no demonstrable shortage in local labor markets or with employers exists in the service district of a college, scarce resources should not be directed to creating degrees when demand cannot be justified empirically.

Similarly, duplication of effort, such as by initiating programs or services readily available through neighboring institutions, should be signals to boards to move to other programmatic or student

services needs, where an institution can play to its curricular strength, labor market needs, and community reputation.

Offering degrees that lack quality or applicability to professional advancement or occupational mobility also departs from our core mission. Boards must guard against proliferating degrees that lack the ability to move individuals forward in their careers.

Perhaps the biggest risk for boards is erroneously believing that degree programs are simply cash cows or a strategy for supplanting lost revenue streams. Not only a myopic strategy, such an approach also violates the earlier tenets for ensuring mission focus and labor market relevance.

Food for Thought

Relevance has been shown to be the strongest predictor of student perceptions of quality and value — and relevance varies widely across degrees and fields of study, according to a recent survey released by the Strada Education Network. With this comes a cautionary note — colleges must scale degree programs to real labor market needs and not flood the market or increase duplicity in ways that diminish perceived value and quality.

Just as noteworthy, the Strada survey also pointed to relevance and completion being completely intertwined and inseparable — to violate one or both could seriously jeopardize institutional reputation and standing.

If recent trends and public surveys teach us anything, it is that we must redouble our efforts to align what we do to real jobs and prospects for increased earnings and economic mobility.

Completion, persistence, and degree attainment are now the highest priorities to maximize returns on investment, and with them, the focus is shifting to occupational and skills-relevant competencies. Employers are not waiting on community colleges. Businesses are ramping up their own occupational badges, certificates, and stackable credentials — and we might be left behind if we fail to innovate and evolve.

Community college baccalaureate degrees are the latest forms of the entrepreneurial and evolutionary stages necessary for institutional stability and viability.

When focused on relevant programs, granting bachelor's degrees allows our institutions to provide their students with more options within the education market, while serving incredibly important social and economic imperatives.

Competitive advantage remains with community colleges only as long as they innovate and compete on the basis of accessibility, affordability, and quality. This is our history, and we must ensure that it is our legacy.



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