

California's Baccalaureate

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HOW THE STATE'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES OVERCAME
CHALLENGES THROUGH EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY.





Mesa College students celebrate the arrival of four-year degrees.



Chancellor Carroll, SDCCD Board President Maria Senour, and Senator Marty Block announce that \$6 million in state funding for California's Baccalaureate Pilot Program at a Dec. 3, 2015 news conference at Mesa College (with Mesa President Pamela Luster looking on).

IN THIS CASE, THE SIXTH TIME WAS THE CHARM. ON A Sunday afternoon, September 28, 2014, California Governor Jerry Brown signed into law Senate Bill 850. This gave the go-ahead for 15 of the state's 112 (now 113) community colleges to offer one bachelor's degree in a limited number of workforce-preparation fields. Senate Bill 850 followed five unsuccessful bills, each attempting in its own way to enable on a limited basis the granting of bachelor's degrees by one or more of the state's two-year colleges.

In spite of its limitations, due primarily to political considerations, Senate Bill 850 was a deal-changer in California. The bill revolutionized the state's vaunted 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education, allowing the state to join 22 others that allow their community colleges to offer four-year degrees. From dental hygiene at Foothill College to respiratory care at Skyline College, a select group of community college campuses in the Golden State are now free to establish a locally focused baccalaureate program.

Why did SB 850 succeed when previous bills failed? Much of this had to do with an effective advocacy effort that built a winning coalition of business, community, and educational leaders who signed on to support the bill. As media endorsements were amassed from some of the state's leading newspapers, opposition evaporated.

The numbers were on the side of the state's community colleges. In California, public universities and four-year colleges annually award 110,000 bachelor's degrees, and private institutions award another 40,000. But to meet projected demand by 2025, California must increase the number of degrees by almost 60,000 per year, or 40 percent above current levels. Governor Brown, being the pragmatist that he is, saw the writing on the wall. He challenged the state's public institutions

of higher education to deliver a bachelor's degree for \$10,000. Where others privately scoffed, California's community colleges stepped forward — setting the enrollment fees and tuition for a four-year degree to be awarded under SB 850 at just about \$10,000. Generating these new degrees also grew in importance as many employers increased their job-eligibility requirements from the associate degree to the bachelor's degree, thereby rendering some community college programs obsolete in their current form.

With Governor Brown's support, California became part of a growing movement of more than 80 community colleges that offer a total of more than 500 bachelor's degree programs in 17 states. These programs fill local workforce demands that four-year institutions cannot meet because they do not offer programs in these fields. At the same time, the community colleges are providing new opportunities for students with limited resources or who are place-bound due to their family circumstances. Proponents note that community college baccalaureate programs also reduce crowding at four-year institutions and reduce costs to students struggling to make ends meet, all while reducing the burden on the taxpayer.

Here in San Diego, the community celebrated when Mesa College was selected in January 2015 as one of the 15 California community colleges to participate in the state's Baccalaureate Pilot Program. However, there was still a lot of work to be done. Mesa needed approval from the California Community Colleges Board of Governors to establish admissions criteria for its new health information management degree — a groundbreaking move, because community colleges are open to everyone. Mesa still had to secure approval of its new program from the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges. And Mesa also needed the U.S. Department

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of Education to sign on before it could offer financial aid to students in the program.

While these challenges have been overcome, Mesa's work remains far from finished. Course syllabi are still being filed with the American Health Information Management Association. And the program is still in the process of getting final approval from The Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education (CAHIIM), a nonprofit that accredits associate and baccalaureate degree programs in health information management in the United States. This body already accredits the college's associate degree program in the same field.

Although some technical challenges remain, Mesa College made history on August 25, 2015, when it opened its doors to 32 freshmen who will have the opportunity to complete an entire four-year degree program in health information on its campus. Its first upper-division cohort in the health information management bachelor's degree program will enter as juniors this fall and be a part of Mesa College's first bachelor's degree graduating class in May 2018.

Mesa College is the first community college in the state of California to offer upper division classes that lead to a Registered Health Information Administrator (RHIA) certification. And no public four-year institution in the state offers a bachelor's degree in health information management, a profession in which annual salaries typically range from nearly \$83,000 to more than \$144,000. What's more, about 186,000 people worked in the health information management field nationally in 2012, and that number is expected to jump by about 22 percent by 2022. In similar fashion, the state's other 14 community college baccalaureate programs also do not duplicate programs offered by the public university sector.

Yet resistance to community college baccalaureate programs still lingers in California and elsewhere in the nation. Florida's community colleges have been offering bachelor's degrees for two decades to help meet local and regional workforce needs and student demand, and they now offer nearly 200 bachelor's degree programs. But a year-long moratorium on community college four-year degrees was put in place in 2014, and some lawmakers have suggested new limits on the campuses, arguing that baccalaureate programs should remain the purview of the state's public and private universities. In Colorado, both Colorado State University and the University of Colorado successfully opposed legislation allowing bachelor's degree programs at community colleges, though compromises that were later worked out now enable Colorado community colleges to grant four-year applied-science degrees in some career and technical fields.

If California and other states are to succeed long-term in bringing forward these urgently needed four-year programs, it will take a concerted effort at both the state and national levels to empower community colleges to take the next step in their mission of workforce education. Fortunately, the numbers are on our side, and the political arguments are shifting in our favor. It appears the community college baccalaureate is a movement whose time has come.



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