Increasing Postsecondary Access Through Community College Baccalaureate Degrees

By Tim Weldon

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Historically, community colleges have served as an entry point to higher education for many students, particularly nontraditional older students as well as those from low-income households. Community colleges provide general education courses that often, but not always, are transferable to public four-year colleges and universities. For students who persist, the outcome at community colleges has traditionally been a two-year associate degree. Over the past 20 years, however, the line in the sand separating two- and four-year postsecondary institutions has begun to erode. Twenty states have begun meeting the demand for more bachelor’s degrees by giving community colleges an expanded role and allowing them to offer four-year degrees.

According to the Community College Baccalaureate Association, the number of states with approved community college baccalaureate programs increased from 11 in 2004 to 20 by the end of 2012. During that time, the number of colleges offering bachelor’s degrees increased from 21 in 54. States authorizing bachelor’s degrees in at least one community college are Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia and Wisconsin.

As recently as 2005, Florida ranked 46th nationally in the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded. The state faced critical shortages of graduates in several areas, most notably teachers and nurses. According to a report issued by the Florida Department of Education, the state needed to fill approximately 20,000 teaching positions annually through 2020 just to keep pace with need. The report also forecast a similar shortage of nurses in the state. Due to enrollment caps at university nursing programs, nearly 2,000 qualified nursing applicants were turned away in 2003.

In 2001, the Florida legislature enacted Senate Bill 1162, which allowed community colleges to seek approval from the State Board of Education to grant bachelor’s, or baccalaureate, degrees in a limited number of fields. Initially, only four of the state’s two-year colleges—Chipola, Edison, Miami Dade and St. Petersburg—received permission to offer four-year degree programs. St. Petersburg, for instance, initially created baccalaureate degrees in nursing, education and information technology.

Slowly but steadily, the number of baccalaureate degrees awarded at the state’s community colleges began to increase—more than tripling between 2004 and 2006—from 123 to 398. Despite progress, just 10 of Florida’s 28 community colleges offered bachelor’s degrees by 2008, primarily in education and health care. The gateway to postsecondary success still seemed blocked by the lack of opportunities for many students to move beyond the associate degree level at Florida’s community colleges.

In 2008, then-Gov. Charlie Crist signed landmark legislation that allowed all community colleges to create baccalaureate programs, subject to approval from the Florida College System. In just two years the number of community colleges offering baccalaureate programs grew to 18. Today, Florida accounts for more than one-third of all community colleges nationally offering bachelor’s degrees.
The number of students earning bachelor’s degrees from Florida’s community colleges also has swelled, from fewer than 700 in 2008 to more than 1,000 in 2009, 1,600 in 2010 and more than 2,700 in 2011, according to the Florida Department of Education. Despite these increases, however, baccalaureate programs account for less than 3 percent of all degrees and certificates awarded by Florida community colleges. Furthermore, of 903,000 students enrolled in the state’s community college system, fewer than 20,000 are enrolled in baccalaureate programs.

Perhaps the most notable example of the expansion of baccalaureate degrees in Florida community colleges is St. Petersburg College—formerly St. Petersburg Junior College. It now offers 24 baccalaureate degree programs, the most of any community college in Florida. That includes 10 degrees in teacher education fields. St. Petersburg College also offers bachelor’s degrees in nursing, dental hygiene, orthotics and prosthetics, and interdisciplinary health and human studies, as well as four business degrees.

Community colleges are required in the early stages of their proposal planning process to notify regional public and private four-year colleges and universities in their service areas when they intend to offer baccalaureate degrees. By law, these colleges and universities have the opportunity to submit alternative proposals to offer the degree program in a location and delivery method that will meet the identified need.

According to the Florida Department of Education, baccalaureate programs at community colleges tend to target and attract students who might not otherwise pursue a degree at a four-year college or university due to varying personal constraints. Despite offering baccalaureate degree programs, the primary mission of community colleges in Florida remains the same—enabling students to earn associate degrees that provide access to a university.

Meeting The Demand For More Degrees

In their report *The Undereducated American*, educational researchers Anthony Carnevale and Stephen Rose describe the dire need for more workers with postsecondary degrees. “The United States has been under producing college-going workers since 1980. Supply has failed to keep pace with growing demand, and as result, income inequality has grown precipitously,” they wrote. One result has been a growing gap between the earnings of Americans of different educational attainment. Their report calls for adding 20 million postsecondary educated workers—including 15 million with bachelor’s degrees—to the economy.

Adding 20 million postsecondary educated workers is possible, according to the report, although the authors concede it will not be easy. “First, it will take political will and commitment from various actors. In this budgetary climate, this is a lot to ask for, but is not out of reach. Moreover, attaining 20 million additional college educated workers will require higher performance from all of our educational institutions,” the report concludes.

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Examples of recent legislation include:

- The Colorado legislature in 2010 authorized Colorado Mountain College, with seven physical campuses and distance learning, to offer up to five baccalaureate degree programs with approval from the Colorado Commission on Higher Education.
- In June 2011, the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents approved a Bachelor of Applied Arts and sciences degree at six of the state’s 13 community colleges. Under Wisconsin’s system, students with associate degrees could earn the Bachelor
of Applied Arts and sciences degree after completing an additional 30 credit hours at one of the six authorized community colleges and 30 hours at a participating University of Wisconsin partner institution.

- Most recently, in December 2012, Michigan’s legislature passed a bill that creates baccalaureate degrees in culinary arts, cement technology and nursing at community colleges. As in the majority of states that authorize two-year institutions to offer more advanced degrees than the traditional associate degree, Michigan’s bill targets areas that have been identified as high need workforce areas and/or ones in which the state’s four-year institutions do not offer bachelor’s degrees.

**Benefits Of Community College Baccalaureate Programs**

Enabling community colleges to offer four-year degrees will increase access to postsecondary education. Broadening the historical role of two-year colleges gives thousands of students—particularly nontraditional and low-income students—an opportunity to earn bachelor’s degrees without having to leave home or meet academic prerequisites at four-year institutions, which are typically more demanding than those of community colleges.

While the historical mission of community colleges has been to provide general education courses that can be transferred to four-year public institutions, all too often an associate degree has been the end of the line, rather than a transition point, in postsecondary education. Countless students have ended their postsecondary studies after earning associate degrees. By authorizing two-year institutions to offer bachelor’s degrees, students are more likely to continue working beyond a two-year degree. This is particularly true for adult workers, those who are unable to relocate and those who reside in rural areas where travel to four-year institutions is difficult. In addition, not all four-year universities accept community college credits, further hindering student postsecondary success.

It’s widely accepted that bachelor’s degrees earned at community colleges are more affordable than at four-year colleges and universities, further enhancing student retention. (See Table for comparison of tuition at two- and four-year public colleges.) Although cautious about the growth of community college baccalaureate programs, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities acknowledged in a report, "The community college baccalaureate is here to stay." The association concludes the absence of a public four-year option might otherwise lead some students seeking bachelor’s degrees to the more expensive for-profit sector of postsecondary education. The association also points out community colleges traditionally work with local employers and develop degree and certificate programs that respond to specific workforce needs.

**Mission Creep**

The idea of the expanded role for community college also has critics, including many within the higher education community. Many four-year postsecondary institutions perceive community college baccalaureate programs as an invasion of their turf. This so-called mission creep suggests offering four-year degrees weakens the historical purpose filled by community colleges. Consequently, some contend community colleges might shift their financial resources and focus more on meeting the needs of four-year baccalaureate students than on the students pursuing traditional associate degrees. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities states, “As a worst-case scenario, the community college might morph into a four-year institution and, as a result, totally abandon the access mission.”

In many cases, policymakers can anticipate opposition to community college baccalaureate programs from the state’s higher education community. Expanding the role of two-year colleges is frequently viewed as increased competition for scarce postsecondary finances. State policymakers should consider whether an overlap exists between two- and four-year institutions when deliberating whether to authorize baccalaureate programs at community colleges and the type of programs that should be made available to the public.

David Pierce, then-president of the American Association of Community Colleges, indicated his reluctance to expand the role of community colleges in a 2002 interview with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Office of Community College Research and Leadership. “I think that if the community colleges truly start offering baccalaureate degrees they will morph into university-type structures and lose their cost advantages rather quickly. Pressures will mount to shift and reduce loads, to have university-like libraries, and other structures that are like university structures. All of a sudden, the community college walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, it’s a duck (or in this case, a university).”

Policymakers should be aware of other apprehensions from the higher education community about giving community colleges the authority to award bachelor’s degrees. Some of these include:

- Program duplication: Community colleges should not be allowed to duplicate academic programs offered at four-year institutions. These dueling programs would create an environment of competition rather than cooperation;
• Concerns about quality: Some believe a baccalaureate degree earned at a community college is inferior to one earned at a four-year institution, that the courses may not be as rigorous, and the faculty and resources may be substandard; and

• Operational costs: Students working toward a bachelor’s degree require additional resources, not required for most associate degree programs. Startup costs can include upgrading faculty, building or expanding libraries and laboratories.

Beth Hagen, executive director of the Association of Community College Baccalaureate Degrees, said some of the arguments being used to oppose an expanded role for community colleges are based on misconceptions.

“The degrees the community colleges are conferring are not the same degrees that are being conferred by universities,” Hagen said. “They’re applied baccalaureate degrees and address a local workforce need. What we don’t see here is the common misconception that the community colleges that want to confer four-year degrees want to become four-year universities, or want to compete with four-year universities. That’s just not true.”

Models Of Baccalaureate Programs

Several models of community college baccalaureate programs exist nationally. They have different structures and purposes. Some states authorize a limited number of community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees. These programs typically begin with one or two majors, but over time add more degrees and sometimes evolve into baccalaureate colleges, often as part of a state university system. One of the oldest examples is the former Parkersburg Community College, which became West Virginia University at Parkersburg in 1989. It now offers 11 baccalaureate programs that comprise more than a third of all degrees conferred at the university.

A second practice is to expand the mission of a state’s community colleges. These programs generally are used to produce baccalaureate degrees in high-demand workforce fields. An example is Washington state, which approved a pilot project in 2005 authorizing four community colleges to offer specialized four-year degree programs. The programs were designed to fill community needs not met by other colleges and to meet the needs of workers who were unable to relocate. That number has since expanded to include eight community and technical colleges offering 13 applied bachelor degrees in Washington.

The third model involves limiting approval of community college baccalaureate programs to specific applied and technical degrees. The rationale is that these degree programs represent a logical extension of technical programs already in place at community colleges, whereas four-year institutions in many cases have no history with these programs. North Dakota’s Bismarck State College offers a single four-year program, a Bachelor’s of Applied Science in Energy Management degree.

In 2009, Illinois adopted yet another approach that promotes collaboration between the state’s two- and four-year institutions. Senate Bill 1883 required the state’s Board of Higher Education to implement a Collaborative Baccalaureate Degree Development Grant Program “to help deliver upper division courses and bachelor’s degree programs offered by bachelor’s degree-granting colleges and universities at a location geographically convenient to student populations currently being served by existing public community colleges.”

Conclusion

Although the role of community colleges is rapidly expanding, the associate degree continues to be the program of choice for the vast majority of community college students. In Florida, where more than two-thirds of all community colleges offer one or more bachelor’s degrees, only about 1 percent of the 850,000 students enrolled in the state’s community colleges are enrolled in baccalaureate programs, according to Hagen of the Association of Community College Baccalaureate Degrees.

By empowering two-year colleges to expand their role and create baccalaureate degrees, even in a limited scope of programs, however, one can reasonably expect to see significant inroads toward meeting the need for 15 million bachelor’s degrees by 2025, as called for in Carnevale’s and Rose’s The Undereducated American.

Source: Community College Baccalaureate Association (2011)
References:


8. Ibid.


10. American Association of State Colleges and Universities. “Update on the Community College Baccalaureate.”


12. Ibid.


15. Ibid.

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