

AT ISSUE

The Community College Baccalaureate

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Credits

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss various issues surrounding the community college baccalaureate. In 2009, President Barack Obama provided a vision to increase graduation rates for students across the nation and challenged higher education to double the number of college degrees conferred nationwide by 2020. In addition, the President urged the country's 1,200 community colleges to be instrumental in this initiative, as they have the capacity to provide the education necessary to produce a competitive workforce. In 2011, the dialogue continues and intensifies. At the 2011 Building a Grad Nation Summit, Vice President Biden issued a call to action to boost college graduation rates across the country and help the nation meet the President's goals. He states, "Right now we've got an education system that works like a funnel when we need it to work like a pipeline."

With student demand for higher education outpacing opportunities to earn degrees, particularly in rural areas, community colleges may find themselves strategically placed to provide accessible and affordable degrees with convenient geographic locations for place-bound students. Many questions, however, need to be addressed before community colleges adopt baccalaureate programs, if indeed they choose to do so.

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What Do the Founders of the Community College Baccalaureate Say?

The topic of the community college baccalaureate has been debated in several forums and has garnered support on both sides of the issue. In part, this is due to the lack of clarity in formulating models and in using inconsistent, even confusing, terminology (Floyd, 2006). It is not a new phenomenon; the community college baccalaureate has been growing and evolving in this country for more than two decades.

As the people's college, community colleges have led in the democratization of higher education in the United States. In recent years, however, rapidly changing external and internal conditions have forcefully indicated that access is not enough (Myran, 2009). Myran further states that the dimensions of the new open-door model should include student access, student success, campus-wide inclusiveness, and community engagement.

Kenneth Walker, founder of the Community College Baccalaureate Association, agrees with the open-door model and states, "Expansion of the mission to include the baccalaureate degree, while retaining the open-door philosophy, is a logical option to mitigate rising demand, access, and cost" (p. 6). In Cohen and Brawer's, *The American Community College*, they state, "The revolution in American education, in which the two-year college played a leading role, is almost over. Two years of post-secondary education are within the reach—financially, geographically, practically—of virtually every American" (p. 23). Walker (2007) agrees that this revolution, as outlined by Cohen and Brawer, is almost over; however, he sees a 'new revolution' emerging. He states, "The authorization for some community colleges to award baccalaureate degrees constitutes an embryonic beginning of what will become a new revolution

which will continue the democratizing process for access to the bachelor's degree" (p. 4).

According to author Michael Skolnik (2007), critics of the community college baccalaureate movement fear that the baccalaureate provision will transform the focus of community colleges and ultimately move the community college away from its mission. Skolnik agrees that the likelihood of change is relevant; however, leaders must address the question of whether this change is consistent with our belief of what a community college is, and whether the changes are on balance for "good, or for ill" (p. 5).

The Community College Baccalaureate and the Open-Door Philosophy

Community colleges, driven by initiatives such as *Achieving the Dream* and *Breaking Through*, are examining their policies on mission, access, and completion. Student success and retention are key elements of this examination.

The **mission** of the community college should describe the "social purpose" of the college (Myran, Baker III, Simone, & Zeiss, 2003). Social purpose is unique to each individual community, and through the involvement of its stakeholders, communities are able to shape the intended social outcomes. Community college missions generally address academic programs and not specifically the duration of the program of study. For example, a community college mission may appropriately recognize the need to prepare workers in specific fields of employment. If the local health care community establishes an entry-level requirement for nurses to possess a Bachelor's of Science in Nursing degree, then some may suggest this falls within the existing mission.



Access serves as the cornerstone of our nation’s community colleges. “As we focus on task, we move beyond the old assumptions, practices, and language that can be barriers to equal access” (Hesselbein, 2002, p. 28). Once individual communities outline the task and establish the charge, a community college’s social responsibility is to create and provide access to viable programs. By aligning the college mission to access, this provides opportunities for students to achieve their educational goals, regardless of socio-economic class, age, or race. If desired, baccalaureate education becomes attainable, enhancing the workforce and allowing for the complexities facing the 21st century college student (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006, Floyd, 2006).

Access has multiple dimensions; college admission and geographic proximity are two of these. Access also suggests that students should have access to the support systems they need to be successful in attaining the degree they seek. The community college open-door philosophy makes this extremely challenging, as students enter with very diverse academic backgrounds and levels of proficiency (Thomas, 2009). For students to successfully complete their degrees (including the baccalaureate), college leaders should realistically address the open-door philosophy and commit the resources necessary to insure student success, including dedicated staff, tracking systems, and financial resources.

Access also includes considering local and regional need as affected by the proximity of other institutions of higher education. Competition from both private and public institutions is a major consideration and should cause organizations to design community college baccalaureate degrees based on need, and with academic rigor and quality assurance. Focusing on student completion, meeting employer needs, and understanding the adult learner are crucial for success (Dougherty & Townsend,

2006, Glennon, 2005). Extending the baccalaureate to community colleges has the potential to address place-bound students, continue student familiarity with their

Approved Community College Baccalaureate Programs by State			
Number of Approved Institution			
State	Year Approved	Number of Institutions	Total Programs Approved
AR	1998	1	44
CO	2010	1	0
FL	2001	18	113
GA	1997	7	71
HI	2004	1	2
IN	2004	1	6
LA	2001	1	12
MN	2003	1	2
NV	1998	3	15
NM	2004	1	11
NY	1996	5	84
ND	2006	1	1
OK	2004	2	4
TX	2003	3	4
UT	1992	2	69
VT	1993	1	11
WA	2005	4	5
WV	1989	1	11
Total	N/A	54	465
American Association of State Colleges and Universities A Higher Education Policy Brief • October 2010			

learning environment, and provide access to a variety of existing delivery systems. However, limited resources and rising costs dictate that programs and services should not be unnecessarily duplicated. In addition,



the overall mission and identity of the community college must not be lost (Floyd, 2006, Russell, 2010).

Student success and completion are unique variables that can be most challenging when discussed in the context of the open-door community college. Thomas (2009) suggests the dialogue surrounding the community college baccalaureate should also include “the challenge that emerges for community colleges when students enter with varying degrees of academic preparation, and with a high percentage requiring developmental education.” Providing these students the opportunity to pursue a baccalaureate degree, along with the student support needed, is a lofty goal, and should not be taken lightly. However, if the organization’s commitment is strong and this goal is achieved in some measure, then the community college will be perceived as doing its job.

Key Considerations

Numerous considerations should be examined before a community college makes the decision to embrace the baccalaureate. While the community college baccalaureate can provide more career options for students across a wide geographic spectrum, the initiative may not be the right fit. Each college considering these degrees will need to determine if the baccalaureate advances its mission, and if it is right for both its students and the community it serves. College leaders should begin to assess their baccalaureate readiness by first understanding the purpose of the community college baccalaureate, and then reflecting on the information that follows

Purpose of the Community College Baccalaureate

- Responds to the employment needs of the community, as baccalaureate degrees enhance career preparation and mobility

- Addresses specific and unique community conditions such as rural isolation
- Provides affordable baccalaureate degrees, as they can be offered more economically
- Enhances existing associate degree programs
- Global consideration: satisfies community needs, and also helps to assure the United States’ ascendancy in a global economy.

Impact on the Community College Mission

- Does the addition of baccalaureate degrees detract from offering associate degrees?
- Does the college mission need to be revised to accommodate baccalaureate offerings?
- Does offering the baccalaureate result in mission creep?

Commitment Level Needed by the Community College

- Will the creation of the baccalaureate enhance or detract from the institutional culture?
- Will the college leadership team be ready for the expanded governance needed?
- Does the college have the financial capacity to sustain the baccalaureate program for the long term?
- Will baccalaureate programs have the support of key stakeholders, i.e. faculty, students, community, and legislators?

The Capacity to Deliver

- Does the college have the ability to offer high-quality instructional programs?
 - Can academic integrity be maintained and quality defined and measured?
- Does the college have the financial, physical, and human resources to support the baccalaureate?
 - Are resources at the community college best used on the baccalaureate, or will they be diverted from other key areas?
 - What impact will baccalaureate programs have on college revenue?

Nursing

Access

Baccalaureate

Technology

Student Success

Education

Completion

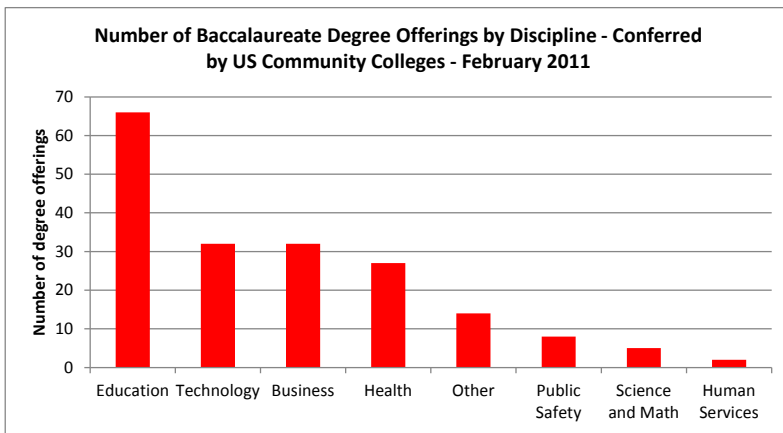
Impact

Mission

Business

- Does the college have properly credentialed faculty already in place?
- Are resources available to adequately cover startup costs?

Colleges, nearly 50% of all post-secondary students attend community colleges. Therefore, the baccalaureate movement is accelerating in order to meet workforce needs for the 21st century.



Most states have regulated the disciplines for which community colleges can award degrees. These fall primarily into these areas: education, technology, business, and health care.

The graphs illustrate the distribution of these academic degrees by discipline.

Conclusion

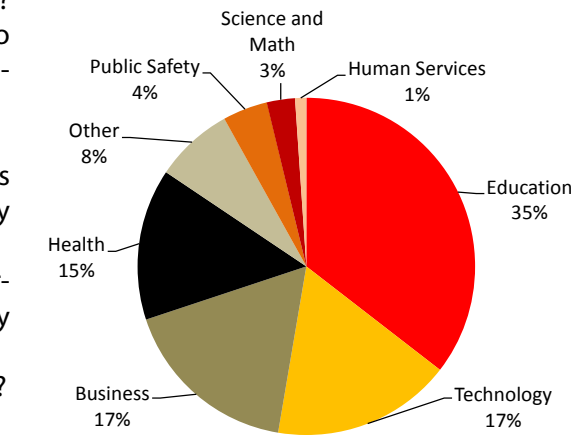
One factor remains constant to the mission of community colleges; they strive to provide open access to

- Can the college meet new accreditation requirements?
- Does the college have the academic resources needed to support student success?
- Does the college have the infrastructure to accommodate new programs and more students?

Impact on College and University Partnerships

- Are there neighboring colleges and universities that offer the same degree and if so, are they meeting employer demands?
- Does offering the baccalaureate degree jeopardize relationships/articulations with university partners?
- Have university partnerships been maximized?

Percentage of Baccalaureate Degree Offerings by Discipline Conferred by US Community Colleges - February 2011
Source: Community College Baccalaureate Association



quality higher education for their communities. Community colleges must remain focused on making decisions that are driven by a comprehensive assessment, which includes meeting stakeholder needs, developing an educated workforce, and addressing state and federal economic goals.

Who is Offering Baccalaureate Degrees?

The community college baccalaureate is a key strategy designed to increase degree completion as proposed by many of our nation's educational leaders. With Florida leading the way in 2001, 18 states currently authorize community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees; several more states are seeking approval. According to the American Association of Community

Before an institution decides to forge ahead on the road to the community college baccalaureate, they must determine institutional readiness. As outlined in this publication, there are many considerations to be studied and evaluated to ensure that the community college is prepared to make informed decisions. The debate is sure to be lively, yet in the end, each organization will have to determine if the community college baccalaureate is the right fit for them.



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