

*Focus in: Study up on important education policies.*

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## Community colleges expanded role into awarding bachelor's degrees

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A growing number of states allow community colleges to award bachelor's degrees as one strategy to meet workforce demands, address affordability and increase access to educational opportunities. Offering bachelor's degrees traditionally has been the domain of four-year institutions, while community colleges have been established to award associate degrees and certificates. Further, community colleges have served as open-enrollment institutions with few, if any, admission requirements.

As a result, the expanded role of community colleges into the bachelor's degree arena is not without controversy. Concerns center on the historically distinct missions of the two postsecondary sectors, competition with four-year institutions, duplication of programs and quality of the bachelor's degrees conferred by community colleges, among others.

This Education Commission of the States' Policy Analysis examines state policies that allow community colleges to offer four-year degrees, summarizes arguments for and against these policies, and offers key policy considerations related to community college bachelor's degree programs.

As more states consider allowing community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees to support workforce needs and education goals, they will have to weigh the pros and cons of these policies.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Twenty-three states allow community colleges to award bachelor's degrees; in most states, however, only a few institutions offer the programs.

Community college bachelor's degree programs are designed to meet local workforce needs and expand access to four-year degrees to a broad range of students.

States typically place limits on the type and number of bachelor's degrees that community colleges can offer to avoid program duplication and competition with nearby four-year institutions.

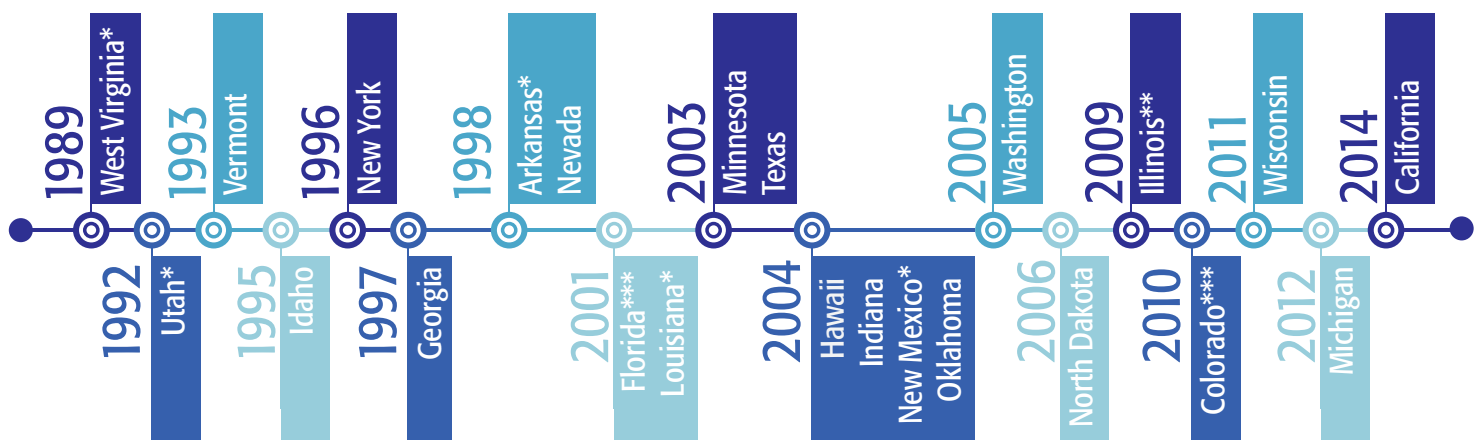


In the early 1990s, increasing demand for employees with bachelor's degrees to meet local workforce needs led a handful of states to permit community colleges to offer bachelor programs. Another driving force has been expanding access to individuals who may not be able to attend a four-year institution and pursue bachelor's degrees, whether due to geographical isolation, financial reasons or life circumstances.

Presently, 23 states allow community colleges to award bachelor's degrees. In most states – with the exception of **Florida** and **Washington** – four or fewer colleges provide bachelor's programs. The majority of community college bachelor's degrees are intended to fill gaps in local workforce needs, especially in high-demand fields. The bachelor's degree policies often limit the type and number of programs an institution can offer, and possibly the number of campuses that can participate. States typically spell out a program approval process and criteria, and some include data collection and reporting processes in their policies.

When considering community college bachelor's policies, state leaders must often navigate contentious debates over the traditional missions of two- and four-year institutions and how the overlapping and competing roles of the two sectors continue to evolve.

## Twenty-three states allow community colleges to award bachelor's degrees



The dates indicate the year the policy was enacted and/or the first year an institution received approval to offer a bachelor's degree.

\* States in which a limited number of two-year institutions authorized to offer bachelor's degrees have become baccalaureate colleges.

\*\* Illinois established a collaborative grant program to deliver bachelor's degree programs offered by four-year institutions at a location geographically convenient to students served by community colleges.

\*\*\* Colorado and Florida initially limited the number of institutions that could award bachelor's degrees but expanded the policy to include all community colleges in 2014 and 2008, respectively.

Sources: Research conducted by the Education Commission of the States (2015), and the Association of American Colleges and Universities' 2010 report, [Update on the Community College Baccalaureate: Evolving Trends and Issues](#).

## Core elements of state policies

State policies that allow community college bachelor's degree programs can be analyzed in a number of ways and through various lenses. An Education Commission of the States (ECS) review found that most states' policies address one or more of the following core elements:

- ◆ Location of institutions offering programs (for example, proximity to a campus offering similar programs).
- ◆ Number of participating institutions.
- ◆ Number and type of degree programs.
- ◆ Program demand by employers and students.
- ◆ Approval process.
- ◆ Cost effectiveness or available resources.
- ◆ Data collection and reporting.

In developing or revising policies, state leaders might consider a series of questions related to the core elements. The responses should take into account the state's context with respect to education goals, workforce demands, demographics, geography and politics. For example, should the policies:

- ◆ Ensure that community colleges bachelor's degree programs are not offered by four-year institutions in the nearby area?
- ◆ Limit the number and/or types of degree programs institutions can offer?
- ◆ Restrict the number of community colleges that can participate, initially or permanently?
- ◆ Require evidence of demand for degree programs, as well as demand by and supply of students?
- ◆ Require program approval by a state higher education agency and/or institutional governing boards?

These questions can help shape policy discussions for states considering the merits of community college bachelor's programs to meet educational and economic development priorities. State leaders also can use the questions to revisit existing policies as education and workforce demands shift and data on the community college bachelor's programs become available.

The following state examples reflect the degree to which the core elements are included in policies and, in some cases, have been revised. **California** and **Florida** address all the elements; **Colorado**, **Texas** and **Washington's** policies incorporate most of the provisions; and **Michigan's** policy only specifies the types of degree programs that can be offered.

### California

[Senate Bill 850](#) (Cal. Educ. Code §78040), enacted in 2014, authorized the California Community College board of governors, in consultation with the California State University (CSU) and the University of California (UC), to establish a statewide bachelor's degree pilot program at 15 community college districts. The participating districts are limited to offering one degree program and must meet a set of criteria to receive approval from the board of governors. The bachelor's degree programs cannot be offered at a nearby CSU or UC campus and must be in subject areas with unmet workforce needs. As part of the pilot evaluation, data will be collected on the number of programs, enrollments, completion, impact on underserved populations, costs and job placement.

### Colorado

In 2010, the legislature enacted [S.B. 101](#) (Colo. Rev. Stat. Ann. §23-71-133), allowing Colorado Mountain College, which does not have a four-year campus in its service area, to offer up to five bachelor's programs to meet workforce demands. Under [S.B. 4](#) (Colo. Rev. Stat. Ann. §23-1-133) of 2014, lawmakers granted authority to the Colorado Community College System and Aims Community College to offer technical, career and workforce development Bachelor of Applied Science degree programs that address the local workforce needs. No limits are placed on the number of programs offered by these community colleges. As part of the approval process, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education will consider whether the bachelor's program is sufficiently distinguishable from programs at nearby four-year institutions, among other criteria.

## Florida

A 2001 law, S.B. 1162, (Fla. Stat. Ann. §1007.33) amended state statute to authorize a limited number of community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees in specified program areas to meet workforce needs. Legislation enacted in 2008, S.B. 1716, opened the door for Florida's 28 community colleges (state colleges) to award bachelor's degrees. The state Board of Education must approve the degree programs contingent upon documented demand, unmet need in the area and the community college demonstrating it has the necessary facilities and academic resources. In addition, nearby four-year institutions must be consulted. The Florida College System issues an annual report that summarizes the status of the programs and progress on several performance measures.<sup>1</sup>

## Michigan

In 2012, Michigan lawmakers enacted H.B. 4496 (Mich. Comp. Laws §389.121), which authorizes the state's 28 community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees in energy production, concrete technology, maritime technology and culinary arts. The legislation does not address the other core policy elements listed above, most likely due to the decentralized and independent nature of Michigan's community colleges. Individual institution's boards of trustees may decide to undergo a review process by the regional accrediting agency and receive authority to offer bachelor's programs.

## Texas

In 2003, the Texas legislature authorized a pilot program for three community colleges to award bachelor's degrees, which had to receive approval from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Under S.B. 286 (Tex. Educ. Code Ann. §103.0012), each institution was allowed to offer five bachelor's degree programs in applied science and applied technology fields. As of 2007, the program is no longer a pilot, but the type and number of degree limitations for the three campuses remain. To receive approval for new programs, the institutions must demonstrate the degrees do not alter their role and mission; obtain the appropriate accreditation status; and consider regional need and connection to existing programs, and not duplicate similar programs in the area. Legislation enacted in 2013, S.B. 414, mandated a study on whether community college bachelor's degree programs should be expanded in Texas.<sup>2</sup>

## Washington

The Washington legislature enacted H.B. 1794 in 2005, which created a community and technical college applied bachelor's degree pilot program. The statute was revised in 2010 under S.B. 6355, which allowed all campuses to award bachelor's degrees. The degree programs must be approved by the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC). Under statute RCW 28B.50.810, the institutions must demonstrate a commitment of resources to build and sustain a high-quality program, the ability to engage qualified faculty to deliver a high-quality curriculum, sufficient student demand to make the program cost-effective and feasible to operate, employer demand to make the program cost-effective for students and that the program is not offered by a four-year institution in the area. The SBCTC produces an annual report that summarizes the status and outcomes of the bachelor's degree programs.<sup>3</sup>

# Presenting the arguments

Supporters and detractors of community college bachelor's degrees have crafted several arguments to defend their positions. Those in favor often cite the ability of community colleges to respond to workforce needs, expand access to a diverse student population and offer more affordable bachelor's degrees. Those against the policies point to mission expansion, competition with four-year campuses, duplication of programs, and the additional capacity and resources necessary to offer bachelor's degrees.

## Arguments in favor of community college bachelor's degrees

### *Adapt to and meet local workforce demands*

Community colleges tend to be more nimble than four-year institutions in developing and modifying degree programs in response to shifting industry trends and employment supply and demand, and doing so within a relatively short time period. Further, two-year institutions often have established collaborative relationships with local businesses that allow ongoing communication related to the ebb and flow of workforce needs.<sup>4</sup> Typically, the demands are driven by degrees in the applied sciences, business, education and technical fields, which nearby four-year campuses may not offer.

### *Expand access to bachelor's degrees to a diverse and non-traditional student population*

Several states' policies are intended to serve students living in rural areas who do not have easy access to four-year institutions or particular degree offerings, and those who are unable to uproot their lives and relocate. Moreover, these policies often are designed to expand access to low-income, first-generation or older students, many of whom may not have considered pursuing a bachelor's degree. The flexibility of many community college course schedules also may be well-suited to the life circumstances of non-traditional students. Lastly, the bachelor's programs provide a seamless transition for students who start at a community college and therefore do not have to transfer to a four-year institution and a new setting.

### *Potentially provide more affordable bachelor's degrees*

Average tuition and fees at community colleges typically are lower than at most four-year institutions,<sup>5</sup> which can help address barriers that students may face related to cost, financial aid and loan debt. Earning a bachelor's degree from a community college reduces tuition and fees for the first two years and, therefore, students may pay less for their full program than at a four-year institution. However, accurately comparing tuition and fee rates for bachelor's programs at community colleges and four-year institutions can be difficult absent cost data at the program level.

## Arguments against community college bachelor's programs

### *Expand community colleges' role beyond their traditional mission*

Some critics of community college bachelor's degrees warn of "mission creep" and contend that the institutions' should continue to focus on offering associate degrees and certificates and preparing students to transfer to four-year campuses. In a few instances, a limited number of community colleges have evolved into full bachelor's degree-granting institutions.<sup>6</sup> Since these colleges have established admission requirements, they no longer serve the traditional community college role of open-access enrollment.

### *Compete with four-year institutions and undermine cross-sector partnerships*

Competition with nearby four-year campuses for students, faculty and state funding continues to be a primary concern as more community colleges award bachelor's degree. Certain programs, such as nursing, may be offered by four-year institutions in the area. Other programs, such as computer science, may have to compete for a limited supply of interested and qualified students.<sup>7</sup> One result could be an inefficient duplication of similar degree programs and use of resources. A related concern is the disruption of existing partnerships between community colleges and local four-year institutions that expand program offerings or that provide transfer and articulation agreements to help students pursue a bachelor's degree.

### *Increase costs and stretch resources and capacity*

Community colleges must attain regional accreditation for the four-year programs, a process that can be time-consuming and expensive, especially the first time around. Most likely, the colleges will have to hire faculty – or perhaps raise salaries for existing faculty – and upgrade facilities to meet the demands and requirements of the bachelor's programs, especially in science and technology fields. Some stakeholders question whether community colleges have the capacity and resources to offer bachelor's degrees of high quality that will be accepted by employers and graduate schools.

## Considerations for state policymakers

In the Core Policy Elements section, ECS presented questions related to specific provisions embedded in states' policies that allow community colleges to award bachelor's degrees. There are a broader set of questions around fundamental topics, however, that could help guide state policymakers' conversations and decisions if they consider establishing or revising community college bachelor's programs. These questions include the following:



## Community college mission and collaboration

- ◆ What are the short- and long-term reasons for permitting community colleges to award bachelor's degrees?
- ◆ Could partnerships with four-year campuses, transfer agreements and online learning programs address the increased need for bachelor's degrees?
- ◆ How will policies avoid competition with four-year institutions, duplication of programs and inefficient use of resources?

## Program approval process and evaluation

- ◆ What information should institutions provide to demonstrate employer and student demand for particular bachelor's degree programs?
- ◆ What agencies and boards should be involved in the program approval process, and what criteria should be used to approve programs?
- ◆ What data should institutions collect and report to ensure the bachelor's programs meet local workforce needs and statewide educational goals?

## Financial and cost implications

- ◆ What are the short- and long-term costs associated with developing and maintaining community college bachelor's degree programs?
- ◆ What will the impact be on community college budgets and other campus programs, and how will institutions demonstrate they have adequate resources?
- ◆ How will costs for bachelor's degrees compare to similar programs at four-year institutions, and should this information be made publicly available?

## Faculty and capacity implications

- ◆ Does the community college have the faculty, administrative capacity and facilities to support and maintain the bachelor's programs?
- ◆ What are the budgetary implications of employing and retaining qualified faculty?
- ◆ Will faculty need to be hired or facilities need to be upgraded to meet program accreditation requirements?

*Note:* Some of the questions listed above were adapted from the Association of American Colleges and Universities' report [Update on the Community College Baccalaureate: Evolving Trends and Issues](#).

### **65 community colleges are offering bachelor's degrees, as of September 2014**

*Community College Baccalaureate Association (CCBA), September 2014*

<http://www.accbd.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Conferring-Institutions.pdf?ct=US&stp=CO>

### **15 bachelor's community college programs recently were approved in California**

*California Community College System Chancellor's Office, January 20, 2015*

[http://californiacommunitycolleges.cccco.edu/Portals/0/DocDownloads/PressReleases/JAN2015/PR\\_4yrDegree-January-20-2015\\_final.html](http://californiacommunitycolleges.cccco.edu/Portals/0/DocDownloads/PressReleases/JAN2015/PR_4yrDegree-January-20-2015_final.html)

*(The numbers listed above are approximations)*

## ENDNOTES

- 1 *Florida College System Baccalaureate Accountability* (Tallahassee, FL: Florida College System, February 2014) <http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7724/urlt/0072357-fyi-baccalaureateaccountability.pdf>.
- 2 Lindsay Daugherty, et. al., *Assessing the Potential to Expand Community College Baccalaureate Programs in Texas* (Santa Monica: CA, RAND Corporation, August 2014), [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR745.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR745.html).
- 3 *Bachelor of Applied Sciences: Policy and Outcomes Evaluation* (Olympia, WA: Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, August 2014) [http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/education/14-4BachelorofAppliedSciencesPolicyandOutcomesevaluation\\_000.pdf](http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/education/14-4BachelorofAppliedSciencesPolicyandOutcomesevaluation_000.pdf).
- 4 Ibid., Daugherty, 12
- 5 U.S. Department of Education, *Average undergraduate tuition and fees and room and board rates charged for full-time students in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, 2011-12 and 2012-13* (U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C.: December 2013), Table 330.20 [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13\\_330.20.asp?current=yes](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_330.20.asp?current=yes).
- 6 Alene Russell, *Update on the Community College Baccalaureate: Evolving Trends and Issues* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of State Colleges and Universities, October 2010) 4, <http://www.aascu.org/policy/publications/policymatters/2010/communitycollegebaccalaureate.pdf>.
- 7 Ibid., Daugherty, 13

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## Related ECS Resources

ECS' [Blueprint for College Readiness](#) and accompanying [50-state database](#) review important policy approaches designed to increase the number of U.S. students who earn a postsecondary degree or certification.

Listen to the first installment of the ECS Blueprint webinar series –[Transfer Policies: Students on the Move](#).

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## Author

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