

NEW BACCALAUREATE SERIES

Washington Community College Baccalaureate Students: How Life Experiences Shape Baccalaureate Education, Employment and Economic Security



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This data note presents results from qualitative interviews with Community College Baccalaureate (CCB) students in Washington state. We use in-depth, longitudinal interview data to describe three CCB students' experiences prior to CCB-program enrollment and through their programs to graduation and employment. The three students we profile credit community colleges with giving them an option to complete a baccalaureate degree that was previously unavailable to them, and they perceive that their CCB degrees contribute to improved employment and career opportunities. They also attribute to their CCB degrees greater economic and personal stability, particularly as many workers face long-term unemployment and financial insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE PROBLEM

CCB degree programs have grown steadily since their inception in the United States nearly three decades ago. In a recent national study, Soler (2019) reported 23 states now authorize public, predominantly associate degree-granting institutions to confer baccalaureate degrees. Among these states, Florida and Washington stand out as having the most fully developed state policy and institutional adoption of CCB degrees. Florida has received extensive attention nationally because of early authorizing legislation in 2001 and subsequent scaling of CCB degrees throughout the state, but Washington has also scaled CCB degrees statewide. Thus far, Bachelor's of Applied Science (BAS) degree programs have been approved in 29 of 34 community and technical colleges in the state.

Our qualitative study helps to fill a gap in knowledge about students' experiences and perspectives toward CCB degrees. Using longitudinal interview data, we studied how students perceive their CCB degrees in relation to their education and employment trajectories, as well as their career advancement. As one part of the [Scaling Community College Baccalaureate](#)

[Degrees: The Equity Imperative study](#), we attempt to create a fuller picture of who CCB students are and how they experience this relatively new form of bachelor's degree.

The *Scaling Community College Baccalaureate Degrees* study was conducted by our Community College Research Initiatives (CCRI) group in partnership with the Center on Education and Labor at New America (CELNA). Together, we sought to better understand policies and programs associated with the scaling of CCB degrees nationwide. [Nine data notes](#) authored by CCRI researchers summarize results pertaining to the national landscape and Washington state. This data note (#10) focuses on Washington CCB students and answers the following questions:

1. What aspects of the lived experiences of students contributed to their decisions to enroll and complete their CCB degrees?
2. How did students experience their CCB programs, and what were their perceptions of the value and meaning of their CCB degrees to their economic security?

3. What does the CCB degree mean for the students' careers, and what are broader implications for their personal well-being and future opportunities?

LITERATURE

The preponderance of research on CCB degrees focuses on what state and institutional policies are adopted and how community colleges change to confer bachelor's degrees (see, for example, Floyd & Skolnik, 2018; Martinez, 2019). The CCRI team also studies these questions (see, for example, Bragg, 2019; Soler, 2019), but we also gather data to address unanswered questions about CCB students and graduates. Our research reveals that, to date, Washington CCB students enroll in 27 of the state's 34 community and technical colleges, and their characteristics differ from traditional college students. These students average 32 years of age, and they are more racially and ethnically diverse than students enrolled in similar university bachelor's programs (Blume, 2020; Meza, 2019). A high proportion of these CCB students work while attending college, much like students enrolled in applied associate degree programs. Despite their active employment, over 40% of CCB students receive need-based aid to help them pay tuition and fees to complete their baccalaureate degrees (Meza, 2019).

Looking at the extant literature on CCB degrees, we found only a few studies of students' experiences in CCB programs and post-CCB employment. One such study was conducted by Grothe (2009) who sought student as well as employer perspectives on CCB degrees. This study showed students (and employers) were favorable toward the idea of community colleges conferring baccalaureates, but they had limited understanding of "applied" bachelor's degrees. Many had difficulty distinguishing the bachelors of applied science (BAS) conferred as CCB degrees from bachelors of science (BS) degrees. Bragg and Soler (2017) drew a similar conclusion from their study of students enrolled in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programs offered by community colleges, but also documented students' favorable perceptions toward community colleges for creating baccalaureate degrees. One student captured this sentiment in saying CCBs are "designed with their [students] best interests in mind" (p. 142). To this point, students perceived that

their CCB programs would be more convenient and cost effective than university baccalaureate-degree programs.

Additional qualitative interviews conducted by our research team with students in Washington and Florida pointed to the value of CCB degrees in opening doors to new career opportunities. McCarthy and Bragg (2019) told the story of a Washington student who pursued a program in software development, choosing to get her bachelor's degree at her community college rather than transfer to a university. Familiarity with instructors, convenient course formats, and lower cost influenced her decision to get a CCB degree. Upon graduation, this student went to work for Microsoft, receiving a promotion in a relatively short time and garnering sufficient income to enable her son to study computer science at one of the state's largest and best-known universities. Another student interview by the CELNA team in Florida revealed a similar successful path to employment. This graduate received a BS in biotechnology from the community college and went on to earn a Doctorate of Pharmacy degree, attributing his success to his applied research experiences at the community college (New America, 2020).

These qualitative findings are valuable and important to understanding how students experience CCB-degree programs and how they understand the meaning and value they add to their lives.

METHODS

We interviewed a total of 17 CCB students and graduates who attended six Washington community and technical colleges (Bellevue, Columbia-Basin, Highline, South Seattle, North Seattle, and Green River) between November 2019 and May 2020, with some interviews extending into the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. We asked leaders of CCB degree programs in these colleges to identify students who had considerable experience in the programs or were recent graduates. We asked them to help us invite students who are members of underserved student populations in higher education. The descriptive results presented here profile three students of color who sought CCB degrees to secure living-wage employment and economic security for themselves

and their families. These students were willing to share their experiences to help inspire other students like themselves to pursue a baccalaureate degree. They were open and candid about their successes and failures in the course of securing their bachelors degrees, and collaborated with our team to tell their stories.

We developed the longitudinal interview protocol using the phenomenological method developed by Seidman (2006). Following Seidman's framework, we conducted three interviews with 11 of 17 students. The other six students who were scheduled for interviews between March and May were part of a reduced interview schedule due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These students were interviewed one or two times to avoid over-burdening them during this distressing time. However, we did integrate a few open-ended questions about COVID-19 into our interviews, and we found most students were willing to share their experiences with us.

The interview protocol was divided into three major parts. The first part focused on the students' journey before entering their CCB program, focusing on their prior education and employment. For example, we asked about students' personal, family, and community experiences, and we asked whether they attended college prior to enrolling in their CCB program. In the second part, we learned about the students' experiences in CCB programs, including what it is like to be a CCB student, and what they value and what can be improved. The final part focused on understanding what the CCB degree means to students' career and life. We sought information about the graduates' jobs and anticipated career paths, including their satisfaction with their employment situation and compensation, as well as interest in pursuing additional education at the graduate level.

To analyze these qualitative data, we followed an iterative process to identify major themes. We wrote stories using a narrative format to highlight the students' experiences and perspectives, including capturing verbatim responses via electronic audio recording. To minimize threats to the validity of the study, we used peer debriefing and member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

CCB STUDENT PROFILES

In this section, we tell the stories of three CCB students, two males and one female. These three students attended Columbia Basin College, Highline College, and North Seattle College, enrolling in programs in three different occupational areas: early childhood education (ECE), global trade and logistics, and registered nursing. The personal, educational, and employment experiences are unique to each individual but we see similarities in their reasons to secure a CCB degree and what they view as the meaning and merits of their degrees.

CHANETA – BAS, EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE), SPRING 2020

"Chaneta" is an African American woman in her 30s who was born in California. She is the third of four children in a middle-class family that moved around the Los Angeles area but consistently resided in or near LA. She was not the first in her family to attend college - her father was a teacher and the family moved looking for safer neighborhoods and better teaching opportunities.

Influenced by her grandmother and mother who were "great" seamstresses, Chaneta decided in high school that she wanted to be a fashion designer. She was drawn to the creativity of making clothes but as she got a little older she began to question her career choice. She could see ways the fashion industry objectified women, and she saw how her creative talents could be applied to food. Pursuing a career in culinary arts, Chaneta decided to go to a since-closed branch of the for-profit Art Institute, eventually obtaining an associate of arts (AA) degree. Throughout her education to this point, Chaneta's parents were relatively hands off, offering guidance and suggestions. However, as Chaneta's culinary arts program progressed, they encouraged her to follow her heart and choose a career working with children and youth. Chaneta observed about her mom, "she knew the education field was for me but didn't push it, and I didn't want to make the obvious choice."

After entering the culinary field, Chaneta experienced long hours and limited opportunities to be a chef. Most of her time was spent “opening cans, warming, and adding final touches to foods that were already made.” Feeling discouraged and still eager for a career that would allow her to be creative, Chaneta decided to look for work in the Seattle area. There, she worked in a catering business for a short time but again, felt unfulfilled and unwelcome as a woman. “Crass behavior from co-workers” led her to ask herself, “Is this the way I want to live, with these people, these hours?” Believing a change was needed, she started working as a nanny, which set her on a new path to a career in education. From her nanny job she found a substitute teaching job in early childhood education and from there, she realized she had found her calling as a teacher.

Working at the pre-K level of a pre-school in a multi-cultural area of Seattle, Chaneta started looking for a teacher preparation program that would confer a baccalaureate degree. Through word of mouth, she heard about North Seattle College’s Early Childhood Education (ECE) Bachelor’s of Applied Science (BAS) program. Chaneta observed, had she not found this program “I probably would have had to uproot my life” because other education programs leading to a bachelor’s degree wouldn’t accommodate someone who was already working. She said, “My desire to go back to school started several years before, and it took me a few years to figure [it] out and find this program.” Several factors contributed to this decision, including that the program came highly recommended but more importantly, she could go to college and continue working full-time. Continuing to garner earnings from her “day job” was necessary for her to pay for the program.

Chaneta graduated from North Seattle College in spring 2020, but obtained a new position using her BAS degree even before she completed it. Her new job involves working for the Washington Early Achievers program which focuses on increasing the training and quality of ECE centers throughout the state. This new job gives her more autonomy than her previous classroom teaching position and also provides her with the opportunity to be creative that she always craved.

To this end, Chaneta complimented North Seattle’s ECE program for encouraging culturally responsive pedagogy and practices that equipped and inspired her to assist other educators to address racial inequity in their classrooms. Chaneta observed, “I definitely see myself as a different person than I was before this program. I think it’s definitely broadened my view and got me to think further beyond the walls of the classroom.” She added that she now has “a better and broader view of early childhood education as a piece of the broader puzzle, and [I see] how important it is to speak up and advocate” for ECE. She described that she more clearly sees how a strong educational foundation relates to the rest of society.

Looking back, Chaneta thought the ECE program “came at the perfect time to take the next step and still be able to sustain a life.” Building on her success, Chaneta is inspired to go further in college. After a “breather”, she aspires to go to graduate school to further her career in education.

JASEN- BAS, GLOBAL TRADE AND LOGISTICS, SPRING 2021

Jasen is an African American male in his 30s who was born in Seattle, Washington and is a first-generation college student. He went to community college in California straight out of high school to play football and run track. He says he was not ready for college then, as it served as a means to play sports, which was “everything” and he did not appreciate the value of education. He eventually transferred to a university in Illinois, but stopped out because he lacked direction and “lost the passion for it”.

That led to his return to Seattle where he worked for Nike, the post-office and for several years at a furniture company. At the furniture company, he worked his way up from Sales Consultant to Management and learned many aspects of international trade and supply chains. He was eventually laid off when the owner decided he was done and shut the business down.

Workforce education services paid for Jasen’s retraining. Enjoying his previous work and having previous experience at community colleges, he

decided to pursue an Associate Degree in International Business at Highline College. He saw school this time as an opportunity to avoid “dead end” jobs, and to provide for more stability and mobility in the labor market. He was nervous going back to school surrounded by students, many of whom were straight out of high school, but soon realized how well he could do in school without the distractions of work and sports.

He brought back to school with him knowledge from the working world and what he needed from his college experience to succeed. Therefore, he became the Vice-President, and then President of the business club to provide those opportunities to his fellow students. In those positions, he took the business club to a case competition event on campus and gathered industry leaders for networking events for students.

He found his way to the Bachelors of Applied Science (BAS) in Global Trade and Logistics through the Center of Excellence in Supply Chain Management (CESCM) at Highline that his advisor told him about. He feels the BAS will help him be a part of creating a “circular economy” and creating infrastructure for sustainability. It has also meant a “new life and second chance at opportunity” and “new doors are opening.”

Jasen feels the CCB is providing new opportunities “...to be in different spaces-has been meaningful-being involved in different spaces I didn’t know exist.” He feels “every new class or teacher” he speaks to, “is opening up new doors to...what I can do in the now.” For example, when talking to people at the CESCM, he learned about their study abroad program to Vietnam, which involved following the products of two local companies, Brooks shoe company and an apple distributor. He applied, was accepted, and while studying abroad met people at those companies. Those connections led him to hear about a position at Brooks, doing “trade compliance.” This is his current job, which is also providing him new insights on regulatory aspects of global trade work. With this new opportunity, Jasen appreciated that the courses for his CCB were offered in the evening, so he could gain work experience.

In his Project Management class Spring quarter, he learned about continuous improvement processes,

Six Sigma and Lean. So, during the pandemic, while working and learning from home, he wants to learn a new skill and plans on getting his Six Sigma certification, while taking classes and working. His propensity for “responsible and sustainable” systems makes these methodologies attractive to him in whatever future work he does. For many people, the pandemic made invisible global supply chains visible when products begin disappearing from store shelves due to broken supply chains. Jasen recognizes that “the degree gives me a little security in times like this, just in general, with this industry becoming more valuable.”

When Jasen started back to school, he was thinking about earning an associate degree to quickly get back into the workforce. The new opportunities and spaces he has experienced on his educational journey have given him insights and a new direction. A faculty member planted the seed when he returned for his associate, when he told Jasen that there is no reason he can’t get a graduate degree. Jasen is now focused on a master’s degree, and plans to apply to the MBA program at University of Washington Foster School of Business.

DIEGO – BACHELORS OF SCIENCE, NURSING, FALL 2019

Similar to the two other CCB students, Diego is about 30 years old. He was born in Mexico before his parents moved to eastern Washington to do seasonal farm work. His family lived in a railroad town so small that it had a gas station and library but no police force. A single wide trailer housed his family and his grandparents, plus another family. Diego’s family moved to migrant housing when he was a few years old, and it was there that his sister and brother were born and where all three children were raised. Married when he was 20 years old, Diego and his spouse took up residence with his parents until a recent purchase of their own home only a stone’s throw away from his parents.

Despite challenging financial circumstances growing up, Diego has fond memories of his childhood with family and friends, and he also speaks appreciatively of his elementary and high school teachers. He describes them as consistently supportive and professional,

encouraging all students (50% White, 50% Latinx) to go to college. He expressed gratitude to teachers who “hammered in that all of us could go to college,” and recalls recommendation letters that his teachers wrote to help him land a groundskeeper job for his parent’s employer. Working in this job all four summers of high school, Diego saved enough money to attend the first year of community college without having to work.

Uncertain of what he wanted to study, Diego took a couple of computer science classes when he started at his local community college; however, he rather quickly decided Information Technology (IT) wasn’t his calling. He understood making a good living was important but he also wanted a career that would be fulfilling and he saw that opportunity in nursing. He observed, “Apart from a good wage and possibly benefits, I saw a lot of room to grow [in nursing]. There are so many nursing branches, and you don’t have to do nursing at all. It’s a good stepping-stone. I know some people who have used their 4-year nursing baccalaureate degree to go to medical school. It gives a different way of thinking when you become a doctor, it’s a more holistic approach to taking care of patients.” Diego expressed the desire to continue into a master’s program once he graduated and secured a good job. He saw the long-term opportunity that a career in nursing could provide and he stuck to his commitment to be a registered nurse. Though his journey took time, including stopping in and out of college so that he could earn enough money to pay tuition and fees, Diego earned his associate degree and then his bachelors of science (BSN) in nursing degree at the same college.

Diego explained that his community college made it very easy to go from his associate degree nursing program to the BSN-degree program. He described the BSN program as much more affordable than the bachelor’s level RN program offered by a public four-year university in the area, explaining that his CCB program was two to three times less expensive. He also appreciated the emphasis on clinical hours that the community college provided, giving him experience in healthcare settings in the community, as well as opportunities to use his associate degree RN credential to secure employment and help pay for his BSN education. He described himself as “incredibly

prepared” for employment and explained that he had overcome some of the jitters a lot of new nurses have when entering the profession. He observed, “You have that first year nurse anxiety but when you’re there alone and you have to make decisions on your own, you’re nervous but confident. The feedback I received from nurse co-workers tells me I was very well prepared.”

Reflecting on his daily schedule that involved juggling work and college over a number of years, Diego commented about the nursing programs at his local community college. He said, “All instructors understand that you’re working, that you’re trying to make a life... I would say the assignments weren’t difficult but the quality of assignment was difficult. You have a standard for yourself and so does the program, really, in being a baccalaureate writer. They didn’t mind us taking a little extra time to turn in assignments due to our schedules but they did expect good work.”

Following graduation, Diego got a job working at the same public health department where he completed his clinical training for his BSN. His experience included working with the HIV program, communicable diseases, and the immunization clinic, and he spoke about the importance of the research skills he learned in his program. He loves the ways he can link learning to work, and he had no idea how quickly he would become essential to the health of his community. Only about six weeks after our first interview with Diego, Washington was the first state to announce a death from COVID-19 and soon thereafter the entire nation was turned upside down by the global pandemic.

Reflecting on his path through college and work so far, Diego is pleased with how his education prepared him for his current position in communicable diseases. Pointing out he would not have been qualified for a nursing job in community health without a BSN, Diego values the work he is doing. Speaking about his CCB program, he said, “Obviously, it has helped me find a really, really good employment opportunity. Honestly, I love this job. I can see myself doing this for a very long time. I love the mix of skills and policy creation. I basically run the clinic by myself. It’s a perfect balance for me, and I can also continue my education and hop

into any field of nursing. My experience will stand out on my application.” Still thinking of graduate school at some point, Diego says his work life is full and rewarding, and he can’t imagine doing anything else right now when his community is fighting a pandemic.

DISCUSSION

We offer a brief summary of themes that emerged in the three CCB students we profile in this data note. All three students were searching for meaningful and stable careers when they found their CCB programs. For Chaneta, her BAS program allowed her to advance in Early Childhood Education in a career that would use her creativity and impact racial equity in early childhood classrooms. For Jasen, his BAS and the new knowledge and experiences it has provided has expanded his options for more stable employment and also graduate school. His BAS program will also allow him to help create more sustainable infrastructure in the supply chain world. For Diego, his BSN program provided a career pathway with financial stability for his family but also fulfills his desire to help his community. In fact, all three students found in their CCB programs a path to improving their own lives, their families’ lives, as well as their communities.

Also at some point during their BAS programs, all three students worked full-time jobs while enrolled in full-time study. They appreciated that the programs were designed around working adults’ schedules, offering online and hybrid instruction coupled to night and weekend classes. Both Diego and Chaneta worked full-time to pay for college while supporting their families whereas Jasen found a full-time position within his field from connections made during his program. In that position, he was able to apply what he was learning in college to his job.

For these students, the CCB is also seen as a step towards graduate school. Diego and Chaneta plan on going back for a master’s degree after working for a few years, building on their labor market experience to refine their career paths. Jasen is currently researching and applying for his master’s program while finishing up his BAS program of study. The BAS

degree programs fit the students’ busy schedules and provide a path toward careers that allow for financial stability for themselves and their families. The students also attribute their CCB programs with raising their aspirations to include graduate school.

THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC

Though unforeseen at the start of our study, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic became an important factor in students’ lives in 2020. To understand the education and employment trajectories of the three students, we gave the students an opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives in living through COVID-19. Below we offer brief statements about how the students’ CCB degrees and positions of employment are evolving during these tumultuous times.

Chaneta reflected on the stability her degree has afforded her during the pandemic. As a former food service worker and a teacher in early childhood education Chaneta would almost certainly have been severely impacted by COVID-19. She believes that her new job in a state agency supporting childcare and early education centers affords her much more job and health security.

Jasen sees a direct relationship between the career he has chosen and the COVID-19 pandemic. He pointed out how COVID-19 has made global supply chains that were once invisible much more visible. Countless products that were once plentiful are disappearing from store shelves due to broken supply chains, heightening the value of the skill set he is acquiring through his CCB degree program. Reflecting on how his situation has unfolded over the last several months, Jasen pointed out the irony of our times. He explained that in many respects the pandemic has heightened the importance of his career that potentially provides him more job security.

Diego has found that his work with communicable diseases and public health has placed him at the epicenter of the pandemic. Unbeknownst at the time of our interviews, Diego’s job is directly impacted by the pandemic. Since taking his full-time position, he has

worked closely with youth at a juvenile justice center, teaching them about a wide range of important health matters. Since COVID-19 struck, he has been teaching them how to stay safe from COVID-19, including instructing the youth on how to sew and make masks for the community. He also works as a contact tracer, locating individuals who may have come into contact with someone who has contracted the virus. His growing interest in policy is interwoven in this work in that he enjoys researching and creating policy that has the potential for long-term improvement to community health. Diego's employment has been central to his community's response to the pandemic, and he expresses a deep commitment to caring for individuals who need information and assistance to live healthy lives through this most challenging time.

NEXT STEPS

Our next steps with this study are to analyze the qualitative data gathered from all 17 students, with an eye toward understanding their experiences before, during and after attendance in CCB-degree programs, and their perceptions of the meaning and merits of their CCB degrees. We intend to publish our findings in CCRI publications as well as scholarly journals to help advance knowledge on the new forms of baccalaureate degrees.

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