

BACCALAUREATE DEGREES AT ILLINOIS COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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A growing number of states and community colleges are either offering or considering the possibility of providing a baccalaureate degree. The change seems to be driven by the combined forces of demographics, a changing economy, information technology, and globalization – really, higher education as a whole is faced with responding to these forces. The goal of this handout is to provide you with some general information and context about the trend, both here in Illinois and nationwide.

ILLINOIS' STORY

The law in Illinois prohibits community colleges from offering baccalaureate degrees. In 2003, William Rainey Harper College initiated an effort to offer select baccalaureate degrees at Harper. After surveying residents in the northwest suburbs, the Harper College Board of Trustees approved a proposed four year pilot program under which Harper may offer bachelor's degrees in two fields of study: a Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing and Bachelor of Science degree in Technology Management.

Legislation was offered to the General Assembly in three different terms. Over the years, the proposal morphed into its most recent form in 2009 as House Bill 656 of the 96th General Assembly. HB 656 listed the following conditions that must all be met before Harper could offer a bachelor's degree:

- The program would not compete with nearby public four-year universities, and the public universities in Illinois would have the right of first refusal to offer the program
- The program would be self-supporting and not use additional property tax dollars, state funding, or funds from community college students not enrolled in the program
- A community need is identified and documented
- The Board of Higher Education approve the offering of the degree programs
- The Board of Trustees determines it has expertise, means, and interest to offer a quality program
- The College considered existing and new partnerships with other appropriate colleges
- It is consistent with existing Board policy

HB 656 passed the Illinois House but was not called by the Illinois Senate due to strong opposition from public universities, private colleges, and the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

In 2014, the issue was reintroduced for consideration by the Illinois Council of Community College Presidents. The Presidents Council formed an investigative committee composed of presidents across Illinois. In January of 2015, the Presidents Council approved a recommendation endorsing the introduction of the community college baccalaureate in nursing and other applied career areas. A report issued by the Presidents Council indicates employers are searching for a workforce with a higher level of education.

Questions considered by the President's Council

1. Is the time right for Illinois community colleges to offer Bachelor of Applied Technology (BAT) and/or Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS)?
2. Should the degree focus be limited to the BAT/BAS?
3. Should the program focus be limited? On what basis? Are there unmet manpower needs?
4. Should there be a limit to the number of programs offered? As a percentage of 2 year programs?

5. What should be the process for securing state authorization to offer the BAT/BAS?
6. Should there be a pilot program? If yes, should there be a statewide joint review committee?
7. Should any legislative approval contain a sunset clause?
8. Will community colleges authorized to offer the BAT/BAS need to seek special required accreditation and discipline specific program accreditation?
9. Should public universities have the right of first refusal? If so, how long and to what degree of commitment?
10. Would an institution's application to offer the BAT/BAS need to be supported by documented data demonstrating need? Demonstrating lack of competition with universities? Demonstrating how the program is in the state's best interest? Demonstrating they have explored other delivery systems (such as university partnerships)?
11. How will the programs be funded? Should the state provide initial start-up money?
12. Should BAT/BAS tuition be set by each community college that offers the same?
13. How should these bachelor degrees be located regionally across the state?

A special committee within the ICCTA was then created to consider applied baccalaureate degrees and the Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing at community colleges. On March 13, 2015, the ICCTA sponsored an educational seminar featuring Dr. Debra Bragg of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and two experts from community colleges in states offering baccalaureate degrees: Dr. Judith Bilsky of Florida State College at Jacksonville, and Dr. Malcolm Grothe of Seattle Colleges in Washington. Following the seminar and lengthy consideration, the ICCTA Board of Representatives adopted the following motion on baccalaureate degree-granting authority at Illinois community colleges:

The Illinois Community College Trustees Association's Government Relations and Public Policy Committee moves to direct ICCTA to invite all appropriate stakeholders in an examination of the option of Illinois community colleges to award baccalaureate degrees in nursing, allied health, and applied technologies. The work should include relevant data with input from all segments of higher education. The work shall produce a report to be presented to ICCTA by November 1, 2015.

While the current efforts are still in an early stage, it is clear the initiative will not be limited to one college, as it had been in the past. The newest initiative may limit the number of programs to be offered, but would not limit the number of colleges that can offer degrees nor would it offer a sunset date.

WHY THE CONTROVERSY?

...because this trend challenges fundamental assumptions about the mission of two-year colleges and could upset the existing balance between the two- and four- year sectors in higher education.

Proponents

Experience from other states indicate that community colleges offering baccalaureate degrees in workforce related technical areas have been successful in two important ways: (1) offering bachelor degrees in areas that local businesses need but four-year universities don't offer, and (2) providing access to adult, working students who cannot attend a traditional university.

- **Increase Access and Affordability:** This is the most commonly cited reason for pursuing selected baccalaureate degrees – meeting the access needs of students who cannot, for whatever reason,

attend a traditional four-year university in a selected program area. The intent is not to compete with four-year universities. Access and affordability have always been and will always be a core mission and strength of community colleges.

- **Respond to Workforce Shortages:** There is an increased demand for four-year programs. The community college baccalaureate would allow colleges to respond to workforce shortages in specific regions, and in specific occupations and industries. Offering select baccalaureate programs is an important and cost effective way to foster local economic development.
- **Meet Employer Needs:** Community colleges are uniquely positioned to respond to employer needs for baccalaureate prepared workers. Applied associate degrees have been the industry standard; however, higher levels of education are becoming a prerequisite for many jobs – especially if an individual strives to achieve a leadership role. As employers seek productivity gains to stay competitive in a global economy (doing more work with fewer employees) they need workers with not only technical skills, but also critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills which are typically gained in baccalaureate programs. It makes sense to develop these degree programs where two-year programs already exist, since many four-year institutions have no history or expertise in these areas.
- **Help Address State Goals for Higher Education:** The Illinois Public Agenda for College and Career Success, endorsed by the Illinois Board of Higher Education, addresses an achievement gap in Illinois. They report on the wide geographic disparities in educational attainment and the high proportion of adults with either college credit but no credential or working adults who need new skills or credentials. The stated goals include: (1) increasing educational attainment, (2) ensure college affordability, (3) address workforce needs, and (4) enhance economic growth. The BAT/BAS can help the state achieve these goals.

Proponents of baccalaureate degrees offered through community colleges see applied baccalaureate degrees as necessary and valid credentials to prepare students for the workforce, a core community college mission.

Opponents

This trend may be considered controversial in some circles. Generally, four-year institutions fear community colleges will encroach on their turf and divert both students and state resources away from their schools. They also fear the prestige of their bachelor's degrees will be threatened if community colleges offered them.

More specific concerns of the state's higher education community include:

- **No Data:** Opponents are concerned the discussion about offering a baccalaureate in applied sciences or technologies is evolving without evidence of an unmet need for bachelor's degrees. They want to see data. They want to see evidence of bachelor program shortages and/or a demand beyond what is already offered. Likewise, if the statewide demand is so low that it does not make economic sense for universities to offer the program, why would the demand be there at a community college? Is there a value to having an applied degree? Will an individual holding a BAT/BAS make more money?

Ultimately, the argument is that the nature of the proposal is speculative – if the demand isn't there, giving community colleges this ability could needlessly further saturate the market and lead to inefficient use of resources – let's see some numbers.

- **Multiple Strategies:** If there is a need for certain bachelor degree programs to be more readily available to meet the needs of Illinois, there are many strategies that should be considered first. Opponents contend the need should be addressed through partnerships between four-year and two-year institutions and through extension campuses of the four-year colleges and universities.
- **Mission Creep:** A phrase tossed frequently around by opponents is “mission creep” – or a change to the mission of community colleges. Community colleges traditionally provide remedial work for students and award associate's degrees and certificates in line with workforce needs in their respective communities – and providing those services at an affordable rate. High start-up costs and possible increases in tuition and taxes add to the concern. Some also suggest Illinois is falling behind the rest of the country in the number of associate degrees being awarded. Community colleges should remain focused on those areas of their mission.
- **Degree Creep:** The concept of mandating higher degrees than necessary to perform a job is another concern. In the past, for example, physical therapists needed a bachelor's degree to practice; today, they need a doctorate. Opponents worry that requiring a bachelor's degree would discourage many people from seeking higher educational attainment due to the higher cost associated with a four-year degree.

Opponents also cite to a decline in workforce diversity, decreased access to health care in rural areas (if a BA is required of individuals in health careers), and a decline in job satisfaction and morale if workers feel their skills and knowledge are not fully utilized. Avoiding program duplication and the burden of accreditation obstacles add to the list of concerns.

AROUND THE NATION

Over the past two decades, the number of states allowing community colleges to independently offer baccalaureate degree programs has steadily risen – as has the number of institutions and degree programs approved. The focus on the increased demand for baccalaureate degrees appears to originate in rural locations and in high-demand fields of study such as education, nursing, and technical subjects. The trend also seems to be fueled by upgraded educational credentials now needed for certain applied and technical fields – where associate degrees once sufficed, but now employers prefer or require workers to possess a bachelor's degree. Baccalaureate degrees conferred by community colleges are in a large variety of workforce related fields. These degrees prepare students for jobs in technology, business, management, law enforcement, nursing, teacher education, engineering, and fields require technical education.

Almost half of the states have begun offering various kinds of bachelor's degrees at community colleges. It should be noted that identifying and counting the institutions that offer baccalaureate degrees is not an exact science due to the variance in approaches. For example, Illinois is counted in some publications due to the “Collaborative Baccalaureate Degree Development Grant Program” developed in 2009 enabling four year universities to offer a baccalaureate degree “at a location geographically convenient to student populations currently being served by community colleges.” As such, this accounting is generally consistent with the literature on this topic.

Florida

In 2001, the Florida legislature enabled community colleges to seek approval from the State Board of Education to grant baccalaureate degrees at four of the colleges in a limited number of fields: nursing, education, and information technology. In the early stages of their proposal planning process, community colleges were required to notify the 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. Slowly but steadily, the number of baccalaureate degrees awarded at Florida's community colleges began to increase.

In 2008, all community colleges were allowed to create baccalaureate programs; and in 2009, the primary mission of these colleges was revised to include upper-level instruction and the awarding of baccalaureate degrees. Beginning in 2010, colleges offering baccalaureate programs for three years may apply to be exempt from the State Board of Education's approval for subsequent degree programs. In the fall of 2012, 23 of the 28 public community colleges and state colleges offered a total of 150 programs in 55 program areas. Even with the growing enrollment in the baccalaureate programs, they only account for less than 10% of community college enrollment statewide and any misgivings from universities have been declining due to budget constraints resulting in an inability to meet workforce demands.

There are a few key differences between Florida and Illinois. First, Florida only has state funding for all public higher education – they don't use property taxes to support community colleges. Second, higher education in Florida is just one system. Florida colleges are all underneath the umbrella of the Florida College System (FCS) and as such, they are coordinated under the jurisdiction of Florida's State Board of Education. The Chancellor of the FCS is the CEO of the system, reporting to the Commissioner of Education who serves as the CEO of Florida's public education system.

- In 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 new degree after completing an additional 30 credit hours at one of the six authorized colleges and 30 hours at a participating University of Wisconsin partner institution.
- In December 2012, the **Michigan** legislature passed a bill that creates baccalaureate degrees at community colleges in five applied and technical programs: culinary arts, concrete technology, maritime technology, energy production, and nursing at community colleges. As in the majority of states that authorize two-year institutions to offer a bachelor's 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 baccalaureate degrees.
- In 2010, the **Colorado** legislature 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 the fall of 2012, CMC began a Bachelor of Science (BAS) degree in Business Administration and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sustainability Studies. In early 2014, all Colorado community colleges were granted the ability to offer four-year bachelor of applied science BAS degrees – provided there is an unmet need. A survey of Colorado businesses showed 94% need workers with skills related to BAS degrees.
- In September 2014, the **California** Governor signed into law a measure that allows a limited number of community colleges to grant the baccalaureate degree. Studies found the number of those with a

bachelor’s degree would have to increase almost 60,000 each year by 2025 to meet employer demands. A study by the Public Policy Institute of California concluded that 41% of jobs in the state will require a bachelor’s degree, but just 35% of working-age adults will have one. Senate Bill 850 authorized a pilot program of up to 15 different community college districts to offer one bachelor’s degree each in select workforce majors where public universities do not offer such a program, cannot accommodate student demand, or do not have the interest. These include dental hygiene, radiologic technology, health information science/infomatics, and automotive technology. The legislature will study the results of the pilot program and decide whether to make it permanent. The pilot program began January 1, 2015 and ends July 1, 2023.

Many states, including Arkansas, Louisiana, Utah, West Virginia, and New Mexico, authorized just one or two isolated community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees. Over time, these colleges added more baccalaureate programs and subsequently evolved into baccalaureate colleges, often as part of a state university system. In each instance, the institution was allowed to grow its baccalaureate offerings.

However, many states have maintained their traditional functions, including Washington, Georgia, Texas, Oklahoma, North Dakota, and New York. These states typically view the community college as uniquely situated to respond to the state’s baccalaureate needs, especially in high-demand workforce fields. The move is designed to aid place-bound adults. Texas, Oklahoma, and North Dakota have specifically limited their offerings to technical and applied baccalaureate degrees (BAT/BAS) to correspond to the needs of local industry.

Community College Baccalaureate Programs by State

State	Year of First Approval
1. Arkansas	1998
2. California	2014
3. Colorado	2010
4. Florida	2001
5. Georgia	1997
6. Hawaii	2004
7. Indiana	2004
8. Louisiana	2001
9. Michigan	2012
10. Minnesota	2003
11. Nevada	1998
12. New Mexico	2004
13. New York	1996
14. North Dakota	2006
15. Oklahoma	2004
16. Texas	2003
17. Utah	1992
18. Vermont	1993
19. Washington	2005
20. West Virginia	1989
21. Wisconsin	2010