

Seeking to Expand Access, Some Community Colleges Offer Bachelor's Degrees

[By Hunter B. Martin, NASFAA Staff Reporter](#)

Across the nation, workforce needs are changing as more employers require some type of credential or degree beyond a high school education. Yet as the cost of college rises and family income levels struggle to keep pace, many students find it difficult to afford the cost of getting a degree. In response, over half of states have created laws allowing community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees.

“This is really about meeting local and regional workforce needs, especially when there’s not a four-year institution nearby or [one that] doesn’t offer certain programs that reflect high-demand jobs,” and often technical jobs, said Mary Fulton, a senior policy analyst with Education Commission of the States (ECS).

Two-year institutions began offering baccalaureate degrees to maintain local workforce needs, combat rising college costs, improve geographical access, and achieve more equity among diverse student groups, such as low-income students, those from traditionally underrepresented groups, adult learners, students supporting families, or those who don’t have an affordable four-year institution nearby.

In 28 states lawmakers have acted by creating legislation that allows community colleges to offer bachelor’s degrees to fill the gap, according to Fulton, although programs are not operating in all of those states. For example, Minnesota passed a law allowing community colleges to offer bachelor’s degrees, but so far none have been offered. Other states have altered the structure of their higher education system and no longer count these institutions under the scope of community colleges that offer bachelor’s degrees, such as Wisconsin, where all of its community colleges [merged](#) with four-year institutions.

This trend is growing. In the last two years alone six states have authorized or passed legislation to allow community colleges to offer bachelor’s degrees and there a [bill pending](#) in Pennsylvania.

Just last week, Daytona State College in Florida [announced](#) it will begin offering a bachelor’s of science degree in accounting beginning in fall 2020, the seventh bachelor’s degree program offered at the college.

“This presents students in our service area an affordable option to acquire a highly specialized, well-paying skill — one that will set them on a career path that will be fulfilling and rewarding,” said Max Nagiel, Chair of the School of Applied Business, in a press release. “The program also aims to close an existing gap in the supply of BS Accounting graduates and the local and regional demand in our service area.”

Despite the growth of these programs, some four-year institutions have expressed concern over “mission creep” and competition over student enrollment.

“A lot of these missions are spelled out in statute and/or system board policies, so they’ve been pretty distinct over the years. Four-year institutions offer these types of degrees and two-year institutions offer these types of degrees. Now, all of that is being blended,” Fulton said. “That

may be perceived as a threat to four-year institutions even if a lot of these states craft the policies to try and avoid competition.”

In both Florida and Washington, the two states where community colleges offering bachelor’s degrees is most prevalent, the majority of programs are in teacher education, a variety of health professions, IT, and business — both supervision and management, according to Ivy Love, a policy analyst with the Center on Education and Skills at New America. Those programs are offered at community colleges to meet specific workforce needs, without duplicating programs offered at four-year institutions.

Despite having a large share of these programs, Washington only began allowing community colleges to offer bachelor’s degrees in 2010. The initial reasoning behind passing the bill was to solve the high, unmet need for teacher education programs.

“Our school districts have been struggling to find teachers – particularly in smaller towns – and to get diverse teachers into the ranks,” said Joyce Hammer, vice president of instruction at Centralia College, during a recent event hosted by [New America](#).

By offering bachelor’s degrees, Washington’s Centralia College offers opportunities for more adult learners who might otherwise struggle to obtain higher education credentials due to having fewer financial resources, supporting families, or living in an education desert — essentially being placebound — making it difficult to travel out of the immediate area to attend college.

“These programs can expand access and provide a pathway for adult students,” Fulton said. “You might have a single parent who has a job — and there’s a nearby community college, but the nearest four-year institution is 20 miles away. It’s just not feasible for them to go to that four-year institution.”

One such student was Melissa Curry, who graduated from Green River College in 2016 with a Bachelor of Applied Science degree in Software Development.

“I was a single mom. I had my son right out of high school and college kind of just got delayed,” Curry said during the same New America event. “I’d always intended to go back, but got comfortable and stuck in what I was doing.”

Curry had worked as a casino dealer for 10 years before being laid off in 2012. She used her sudden lack of employment to pursue an associate degree at Green River College, about 30 minutes outside of Tacoma, Washington.

“My son was in middle school at the time and Green River was close to his school, so it made sense to go there,” Curry said.

After earning her associate degree, Curry had planned to transfer to a four-year institution. But after doing some research she learned not all of her credits would be transferable. Instead, she enrolled in Green River’s inaugural cohort for the bachelor’s degree in software development; the program launched in 2014.

After graduating, Curry was accepted into Microsoft’s LEAP program — a 16-week paid apprenticeship program targeting graduates from diverse, non-traditional backgrounds, such as those returning to the workforce after time away — and eventually became a program manager

at the elite software company. Four of her cohort-mates soon followed suit and joined Microsoft through the LEAP program before getting hired.

According to Ken Hang, Curry's program director and a software development instructor, other Green River College graduates have gone on to find jobs at Amazon, Disney, and Boeing, to name a few. Others have gone on to pursue graduate school.

Not only are students succeeding post-college, but the price is also significantly more affordable. Both Centralia College and Green River College operate on the "two plus two" model, in which students must obtain an associate degree or 90 transfer credits before being accepted to the baccalaureate program. Tuition for the associate degree is about \$1,500 a quarter, while for those in the bachelor's programs full-time, it runs about \$2,500 to \$2,700 a quarter.

Since community colleges often serve much more diverse groups of students than four-year colleges, these more affordable programs offer an equitable opportunity for a broader range of students to obtain bachelor's degrees, according to Love.

For example, Miami Dade College in Florida is a Hispanic-serving institution; 73% of their students are Hispanic, 16% are black, and 7% are white, while about 50% are first-generation students, according to Julie Alexander, the vice provost of academic affairs at Miami Dade College.

"We're the most affordable program in town," Alexander said, noting the average cost for a bachelor's degree is "just shy" of \$15,000 over four years. By comparison, she said bachelor's degrees cost upward of \$25,000 at Florida International University, and about \$200,000 at the private University of Miami.

Not only are more diverse groups of students accessing higher education, but they're also succeeding after they graduate, Alexander said. Students that graduate from Miami Dade College have a 95% job placement rate.

"They are getting jobs and they're getting good ones," with average salaries of \$50,000, according to Alexander.

Florida was among the first state to pass legislation that allowed community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees in the late 1990s. Today, all but one of the state's 28 two-year institutions offers at least one bachelor's degree program.

The law passed after a lengthy process that involved many conversations between community colleges and universities. According to Alexander, community colleges advocated for the right to offer workforce baccalaureate degrees to raise credential levels in the Florida population, which was a known priority of the state. However, she added that the public universities initially took issue with these types of programs.

Once the law passed, Miami Dade College was one of the first schools to begin offering bachelor's degrees in teacher preparation and business supervision and management. Today, Miami Dade College offers about 17 bachelor's degree programs, ranging from film, television, and digital production, to nursing and programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). In total, the bachelor's degree programs make up about 5% of all students enrolled at the college, Alexander said.

Even though allowing community colleges offering bachelor's degree programs has increased access and affordability for many students, the pushback from four-year colleges and universities questions whether there is a mission creep, duplication of programs, a lowering of program quality, or competition over student enrollment.

“These policies expand the roles of community colleges into the domain of four-year institutions, and that’s where a lot of the pushback comes,” New America’s Love said.

An [Inside Higher Ed](#) survey of 784 four-year college presidents released earlier this year found that 68% of presidents at public and private four-year institutions disagreed with the idea that community colleges should be allowed to offer bachelor's degrees. The presidents listed primary concerns as lowering degree quality (62%), mission creep (58%), and increasing competition (44%).

However, most states actively try to avoid competition between community colleges and traditional four-year institutions. Programs have to go through a strict approval process to ensure new bachelor's degree programs are not duplicative or potentially taking students away from other institutions. This is also why baccalaureate degrees offered by community colleges are almost exclusively applied or technical degrees, according to Love.

According to Miami Dade College's Alexander, the missions of community colleges has always been to promote access, not competition.

“The reason that community colleges and Miami Dade College made a decision to offer those programs was really all about access to the citizens and to the populations that we serve, which are typically different than the populations that the state universities serve,” Alexander said.

Publication Date: 11/19/2019