

The Argument for Community College Baccalaureate Programs

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the need for community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees. A research of the literature examined the need for this type of degree as well as how it fits with the mission of the community college. This paper will argue that the literature indicates both a need for these programs as well as the ability and willingness for community colleges to deliver them. The literature also shows, however, a gap in available research on the outcomes achieved by community colleges offering these programs.

With the increasing demand for more baccalaureate degree holders, higher education leaders must examine the role community college baccalaureate (CCB) programs can assume in meeting that demand through Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) degrees. The purpose of this paper is to present research and evidence supporting the CCB as an effective way for more students to complete a baccalaureate degree especially as it relates to BAS degrees.

### Introduction

President Obama, Complete College America, The Bill and Melinda Gate Foundation, and many other organizations have made completing post-secondary education a central issue in the dialogue of American education and economic prosperity. This is illustrated by the American Graduation Initiative where the goal is to make the U.S. the world leader in college completion by 2020. The Initiative specifically links this completion agenda to the skills needed for a successful workforce (Obama, 2009). Many of these groups also assert that completing a bachelor's degree should be the primary goal with goals of major increases in the number of adults with a bachelor's degree as the benchmark. In response, legislatures and governing boards in nearly 40 states have authorized community college baccalaureate (CCB) degrees in which community colleges confer their own baccalaureate degrees (McKinney et al., 2013).

Another central dialogue in the media and of politicians is the need to make college more affordable. The cost of attending college and student debt have risen dramatically over the past three decades. These issues have transcended scholarly

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research and conversations amongst practitioners to become almost daily stories in the news or parts of politicians' speeches. These goals of making college more affordable and ensuring more students have access to higher education has led to community colleges exploring their role in obtaining these objectives.

### Findings

Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degrees are often required to gain the technical skills necessary to obtain entry level positions in a number of career fields ranging from health care and nursing to areas in technology and engineering. However, a baccalaureate degree is increasingly being required to move beyond the entry level position. Since AAS degrees have traditionally been viewed as terminal degrees, recipients have historically been left with few options for advancing to a baccalaureate degree without starting over (Floyd and Walker, 2009; Townsend et al., 2009; Bragg and Ruud, 2012).

If traditional Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science programs will not accept the degrees or credits earned in an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) program, it is imperative for institutions to create an alternative pathway for these students to continue their education beyond the Associate level. A BAS degree provides that opportunity for associate of applied science credits to be applied directly to a baccalaureate degree where a student completes further work to obtain the advanced skills and critical thinking requisite of the baccalaureate level thereby preparing the student for career advancement (Bragg and Ruud, 2012).

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If BAS programs are in fact a good way to ensure students can move from an AAS to the baccalaureate level, the question then becomes is it appropriate for BAS degrees to be awarded by community colleges? Because of the community college's historical mission of working with students who may not traditionally have access to universities for a number of reasons ranging from location to cost and many more, it appears that the BAS could be viewed simply as an extension of that mission to serve local, underserved populations.

According to McKinney, Scicchitano, and Johns (2013), community colleges studied cited issues relating to the community colleges' mission of serving students who might not otherwise have access to higher education through traditional baccalaureate degree granting institutions as the primary reason for community colleges to develop community college baccalaureate (CCB) programs. "The two most important reasons community colleges gave for deciding to offer baccalaureate degrees are to 'increase access for place-bound students' and 'address unmet needs in the community'" (p.58). A 2012 study by England-Siegerdt and Andreas of applied baccalaureate degrees at community colleges in Washington reaffirms that delivering baccalaureate degrees to place-bound students in geographic areas not served by traditional baccalaureate degree granting institutions was a factor in creating CCB programs in that state. Additionally, Petrosian's (2013) study of three CCB programs in Texas showed that the biggest perceived factor amongst faculty and administrators for creating CCB programs was meeting student and workforce needs. These studies demonstrate a clear perception that BAS degrees offered at community colleges are meeting a need that cannot be met by existing baccalaureate programs.

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Another argument in favor of creating CCB programs is the rising cost of obtaining a baccalaureate degree, especially at traditional baccalaureate degree granting institutions. In the 30 years covering 1984-2013, the average cost of full-time tuition and fees at 4-year institutions rose from \$5,616 to \$14,101 in 2013 constant dollars which is an increase of 151%. During the same time period, the average cost for full-time tuition and fees at 2-year institutions rose from \$1,796 to \$3,322 representing an increase of 85% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). As universities continue to shift their focus from undergraduate education and teaching to graduate education and research (Hanson, 2009; Floyd and Walker, 2009), it seems likely that this divide will continue to grow and place the cost of a baccalaureate degree at a traditional baccalaureate degree granting institution even further out of financial reach for more and more students.

Finally, CCB programs can be viewed as the natural evolution of community colleges responding to local needs. As Floyd and Walker argue “The decision to can be seen as an attempt to provide each citizen with the opportunity to participate fully in the mainstream of American economic life” (2009, p.91) which falls directly in line with community college mission focus on access and opportunity. Hanson (2009) goes further to argue that because so many underrepresented students study at community colleges disallowing CCB programs would serve to perpetuate a two-tier system of higher education where privileged students attend universities and underrepresented students attend institutions that do not offer baccalaureate programs. Therefore, it is in the historical tradition of community colleges providing access to underserved populations that CCB programs are a natural fit for community colleges.

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While there are many arguments for CCB programs, there are also many arguments that these programs do not belong at community colleges. First, developing baccalaureate degree programs at community colleges will negatively affect enrollment at traditional baccalaureate degree granting institutions. While more data is needed to be certain one way or another, preliminary data from Floyd and Walker (2008) relating to CCB programs in Florida would seem to indicate that these programs are limited in scope and have not been detrimental to enrollment at traditional baccalaureate degree granting institutions.

Another major concern surrounding CCB programs is the fear of mission creep and loss of institutional identity. Wagoner and Ayon (2012) argue that a shift in community colleges to offering baccalaureate degrees will result in new policies and programs and could lead to resources being allocated away from the traditional mission of community colleges. However, Hanson (2009) and Floyd and Walker (2009) both point out that higher education has always been adapting to changing conditions and, specifically Floyd and Walker, the move toward offering CCB degrees could simply be viewed as the most recent adaptation in institutions that have been responsive to community and workforce needs in the past.

### Conclusion

The seemingly clear need for additional pathways and opportunities for students to be able to complete a baccalaureate degree have created conditions that make the expansion of Bachelor of Applied Science degrees and specifically those offered by community colleges something that should be strongly considered by community

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college leaders. The focus of the BAS degree and CCB programs fall directly in line with the mission of community colleges to expand access as well as the strength of community colleges in serving traditionally underserved populations at an affordable cost.

Community college leaders and researchers, however, should continue to monitor and investigate the results these programs produce. Most of the literature to date addresses the need and arguments for or against CCB programs, but there is little empirical evidence as to their effectiveness and long-term effect on the institutions that offer them and the students who take them. It will be important to investigate these programs and continue to adapt as needed.

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