

Community College Bachelor's Degrees: An Update on State Activity and Policy Considerations

Mary Fulton

Nearly half of the states allow community colleges to award bachelor's degrees as one strategy to meet workforce demands, increase access to educational and career advancement opportunities, address affordability and raise attainment rates.

Emerging [research](#) also suggests that community college bachelor's degrees may play a role in better serving a more diverse student population. Students who enroll in community college bachelor's programs are typically adult learners who are working and may not be in a position to study full time toward a bachelor's or transfer to a four-year institution. Further, the programs may address the low rates of underserved students and rural residents with a bachelor's degree. One [report](#) found that about 35% of white adults hold at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 18% of adults from underrepresented groups. And only 8% of individuals with bachelor's degrees live in rural counties.

The expanded role of community colleges into the bachelor's degree arena is not without controversy. Offering bachelor's degrees is traditionally the domain of four-year institutions, while community colleges were established to award associate degrees and certificates. Concerns center on the historically distinct missions of the different postsecondary sectors, competition with four-year institutions, duplication of programs and quality of the bachelor's degrees conferred by community colleges, among others.

The postsecondary landscape is changing, however, with respect to who delivers instruction, programs and services to meet the needs of students, states and businesses. Increasingly, higher education is less clearly divided among different types of institutions and providers.

This Policy Brief summarizes arguments for and against community college bachelor's degrees, identifies core elements of and summarizes state policies, and offers policy considerations related to community college bachelor's degree programs.

Twenty-three states allow community colleges to offer bachelor's degree programs.

Florida and **Washington** have scaled community college bachelor's programs more than any other state.

Most states' policies address one or more of seven core elements, which are detailed in this brief.

Current Landscape of Community College Bachelor's Programs

About 130 public, two-year institutions awarded bachelor's degrees in 2016-17, according to the [American Association of Community Colleges](#). A University of Washington [paper](#) includes a table indicating the number of public; tribal; private, nonprofit; and private, for-profit colleges that are permitted to confer bachelor's degrees. A [project](#) at the university is examining the policies that support the implementation of these degree programs. However, additional research and data are needed to better understand the implications, successes and challenges of community college bachelor's programs.

Community colleges in **Florida** and **Washington** have scaled bachelor's degrees more than any other state, and their postsecondary systems publish regular reports on the programs. Data from recent reports provide a snapshot of the number of participating institutions and programs; enrollment in programs; student demographics; and student outcomes.



FLORIDA

27/28

of Florida College System institutions offer bachelor's degrees.



7,500

bachelor's degrees awarded in 2015-16.



68%

of students were enrolled in **business supervision management, nursing, public safety, business administration or information technology** programs.

177

bachelor's degree programs colleges offered.

SOURCE: A 2016 [accountability report](#) published by the department of education's Division of Florida Colleges.



WASHINGTON

27/34

of Washington's community and technical colleges offer bachelor's degrees.



3,500

bachelor's degrees awarded since 2007.



85%

of students were enrolled in **business, health and safety or STEM** programs.

102

bachelor's degree programs colleges offered.

SOURCE: A 2019 [paper](#) by the University of Washington's Community College Research Initiatives project.

Presenting the Arguments

Supporters and detractors of community college bachelor's degrees present several arguments to defend their positions. Those in favor often cite the ability of community colleges to respond to workforce needs; expand access and provide services to a diverse student population; offer more affordable bachelor's degrees; and increase attainment rates. 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 and may be better positioned to respond to a changing workforce, especially in high-demand fields. Further, two-year institutions often have collaborative relationships with local businesses that allow ongoing communication related to the ebb and flow of workforce needs. Typically, the workforce demands are driven by degrees in the applied sciences, business, education and technical fields, which nearby four-year campuses may not offer. The applied degrees are typically more career-oriented and may focus less on general education course requirements.

EXPAND ACCESS TO BACHELOR'S DEGREES TO A DIVERSE AND NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT POPULATION.

Several states' policies are intended to serve students living in areas without a nearby four-year institution or ones that do not offer particular bachelor's programs, and individuals who are not in a position to uproot their lives

and relocate. Recent studies ([here](#) and [here](#)) estimate that 35 to 40 million individuals across America live in so-called education deserts with no or only one broad-access college nearby. Moreover, these community college bachelor's policies often are designed to expand access to low-income, first-generation or older students, and students of color. Many of these students work full time, have child care needs, attend college part time or face other life circumstances that require flexibility and services that some four-year institutions may not provide. 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 possibly risk losing course credits.

POTENTIALLY PROVIDE MORE AFFORDABLE BACHELOR'S DEGREES.

Average tuition and fees at community colleges typically are lower than at most four-year institutions, 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 and borrow 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 drift into the domain traditionally held by four-year institutions. They contend that the community colleges should continue to focus on their core purpose of offering associate degrees and certificates and preparing students to transfer to four-year campuses.

COMPETE WITH FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS AND UNDERMINE CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS.

Competition with nearby public, four-year campuses for students, faculty and state funding continues to be a primary concern as more community colleges offer bachelor's programs. A [2018 study](#), however, found that allowing community colleges to create bachelor's programs in Florida had a greater impact on degree production for similar

programs at local for-profit institutions than at local four-year, public or private nonprofit institutions. A related concern is the disruption of existing partnerships between community colleges and local four-year institutions that expand program offerings or provide transfer and articulation agreements to help students pursue a bachelor's degree.

INCREASE COSTS AND STRETCH RESOURCES AND CAPACITY.

Community colleges typically must attain regional accreditation for the four-year programs, a process that can be time-consuming and expensive, especially the first time around. The colleges may have to hire faculty or perhaps raise salaries for existing faculty. In addition, the institutions may have to upgrade facilities to meet the demands and requirements of bachelor's programs, especially in science and technology fields. There are concerns that these potential, additional expenses might raise the overall costs for attending community colleges. Some stakeholders also 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.

Core Elements of State Policies

State policies that allow community college bachelor's degree programs can be analyzed through various lenses. An Education Commission of the States review found that most states' policies address one or more of the following core elements. The states mentioned below enacted legislation or significantly revised statutes in recent years. The State Policy Activity section provides a summary of each of these state's policies.

- **Program duplication and competition.** Several states, including California, Colorado, Missouri, Ohio and Texas, consider whether community college bachelor's

degree programs are offered at nearby four-year campuses or would otherwise duplicate existing programs.

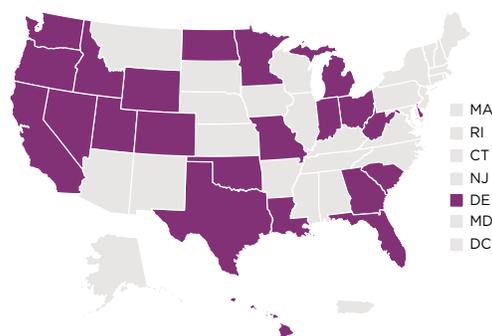
- Number of participating institutions.** A University of Washington [report](#) classifies state's policies based on whether all or some two-year institutions are authorized to award bachelor's degrees. The analysis found that 11 states permit all community colleges to offer bachelor's programs, while 12 states limit the number of participating institutions.
- Number and type of degree programs.** California and Texas limit the number of programs a community college can offer, while Michigan and South Carolina specify the types of bachelor's degrees colleges can award.
- Program demand by employers and students.** A number of states, including California, Colorado, Ohio, Oregon and Texas, require community colleges to demonstrate employer and/or student demand for the proposed bachelor's programs.
- Program approval process and criteria.** California, Colorado, Missouri, Ohio and Texas describe the criteria for boards and agencies to consider when approving community college bachelor's programs in statute. Some states also indicate that colleges must meet bachelor's program requirements from regional accreditation agencies.
- Cost effectiveness, available resources or capacity.** California, Colorado, Missouri, Oregon, Texas and Wyoming address cost effectiveness of bachelor's programs and may require colleges to demonstrate their capacity to support the programs with resources, faculty, facilities or educational materials.

- Data collection, reporting and evaluation.** California and Wyoming require postsecondary systems to collect and report data related to community college bachelor's programs, which may be used for evaluation purposes.

State Policy Activity

Presently, 23 states allow community colleges to award bachelor's degrees through statute, board policy or informal agreements. In some states, the number and type of degree programs are limited and only one or two institutions may be authorized to offer bachelor's degrees. In other states, several two-year colleges offer a number and range of programs.

States That Allow Community Colleges to Award Bachelor's Degrees



23 states: California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, Washington, West Virginia and Wyoming.

See Appendix A for a list of state legislation, statutes and policies. **NOTE:** The list of states continues to evolve as community colleges become four-year degree granting institutions, states reform their postsecondary governance systems, policies are revised, and research emerges on community college bachelor's degrees.

State leaders continue to show interest in allowing community colleges to enter or expand their reach into the bachelor's degree arena. Education Commission of the States' [policy tracking](#) (select "PS Governance" and "Degree Programs") found that between 2016 and 2019:

- At least 16 states proposed legislation related to community college bachelor's degrees.
- Nine states enacted policies: **California, Colorado, Idaho, Missouri, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas** and **Wyoming**.
- Legislation failed in **Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Nevada** and **New Jersey**, and is pending in **Pennsylvania**.
- Except for **Florida** and **Maryland**, the proposed and enacted policies allow, revise or expand the authority of two-year institutions to award bachelor's degrees. Florida's governor vetoed a 2017 bill that would have capped enrollment in upper-level courses at community colleges. A 2018 Maryland bill would have prohibited community colleges from offering bachelor's degrees.

State Policy Examples

The following states enacted policies related to community college bachelor's degree programs since 2010: **California, Colorado, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas** and **Wyoming**. See Appendix A for additional information on state and postsecondary system policies.



[S.B. 850](#) (Cal. Educ. Code [§78040](#)), enacted in 2014, authorizes the California Community College Board of Governors, in consultation with 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 districts are limited to offering one degree program and must meet a set of criteria to receive approval from the board of governors. For example, institutions must document unmet workforce needs in the subject area of the degree; and demonstrate the expertise, resources and student interest to offer a quality bachelor's degree. The bachelor's degree programs cannot be offered at a nearby CSU or UC campus.

[S.B. 1406](#) (2018) extends the dates for establishing pilot bachelor's degree programs by three years until 2026. As part of the pilot evaluation, data are collected on the number of programs, enrollments, completion, impact on underserved populations, costs and job placement. The state's legislative analyst's office issued a final [evaluation report](#) that includes alternatives to the pilot as well as potential improvements if the program is retained or expanded.



In 2010, the Legislature enacted [S.B. 10-101](#) (Colo. Rev. Stat. Ann. [§23-71-133](#)), allowing Colorado Mountain College to offer up to five bachelor's programs to meet workforce demands. Under [S.B. 14-004](#) of 2014, lawmakers granted authority to the Colorado Community College System and Aims Community College to offer bachelor of applied science degree programs that address local workforce needs. No limits are placed on the number of programs offered by these community colleges. As part of the approval process, the statewide coordinating board considers workforce and student demand, cost-effectiveness of the program, duplication with programs at nearby four-year institutions, and regional and professional accreditation requirements, among other criteria.

[H.B. 18-1086](#) and [H.B. 18-1300](#) (2018) allow a community college in the state system or a community college district to offer a bachelor's of science degree in nursing, if the program meets the coordinating board's criteria. In 2019, lawmakers enacted [H.B. 19-1153](#) that allows the Colorado Mountain College board to authorize a limited number of bachelor's degrees instead of the previous cap of no more than five programs.



In 2012, Michigan lawmakers enacted [H.B. 4496](#) (Mich. Comp. Laws [§389.121](#)) that authorizes the state's community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees in energy production, concrete technology, maritime technology and culinary arts. An 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.



[H.B. 1465](#) (2018) allows the Missouri Coordinating Board for Higher Education to authorize community colleges to offer bachelor's programs when such degrees are necessary to meet accreditation, licensure or employment requirements. The coordinating board must consider duplication with existing programs; feasibility of collaboration with a university to meet student and employer needs; and an institution's academic and financial capacity to offer the program in a high-quality manner (Mo. Ann. Stat. [§163.191](#)). Another legislative action, [S.B. 807](#) (2018), allows the West Plains campus of Missouri State University, a two-year institution, and the State Technical College of Missouri to offer bachelor's degrees if authorized by the coordinating board (Mo. Ann. Stat. [§174.500](#) and [§178.636](#)).



The 2018-19 budget bill, [H.B. 49](#), requires the Ohio Department of Higher Education's chancellor to establish a program under which community and technical colleges may apply to offer applied bachelor's degree programs. The chancellor may approve programs that demonstrate: an agreement between a college and regional business to train students in an in-demand field and employ students upon completing a program, regional workforce needs in an in-demand field with long-term sustainability, that the program is not offered by a state university or private college or university, and an industry partner's willingness to offer workplace-based learning and employment opportunities to students enrolled in the program. The law creates a second pathway for approval if the program clearly demonstrates a unique approach to benefit the higher education system or the state (Ohio Rev. Code Ann. [§3333.051](#)). See more in the [budget summary](#) for the department of higher education.



[S.B. 3](#) (2019) allows community colleges to offer applied bachelor's degrees if approved by the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission. A community college must submit the following information to the commission: (1) description of the program to be offered; (2) method by which the program will be created, including any necessary accreditation by the relevant accrediting agency; (3) documentation of local unmet workforce needs that would be addressed by offering the program; and (4) documentation that the community college has the expertise, resources and student interest necessary to make the program successful (Or. Rev. Stat. Ann. [§348.910](#)).



Under [H.B. 4931](#) (2018), technical colleges may offer bachelor's degrees in advanced manufacturing technology if approved by the South Carolina Board for Technical and Comprehensive Education and South Carolina Commission on Higher Education (S.C. Code Ann. [§59-103-15\(4\)](#)).



In 2003, the Texas Legislature enacted [S.B. 286](#) that authorized a pilot program for three community colleges to offer five bachelor's degree programs in applied science and technology fields. Legislation enacted in 2013, [S.B. 414](#), mandated a [study](#) on whether community college bachelor's degree programs should be expanded. In 2017, lawmakers enacted [S.B. 2118](#) (Tex. Educ. Code Ann. [§130.302-312](#)) that allows the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to authorize all community colleges to offer one or more bachelor's programs, including applied science with an emphasis in early childhood education, applied technology or nursing, and programs that demonstrate a workforce need. Community colleges may not offer more than

three bachelor's degree programs at any time; however, colleges that participated in the original pilot project may offer up to five programs. In approving bachelor's programs, the coordinating board must consider regional workforce needs; complement with other programs and course offerings at the college; duplication of programs offered by other institutions; and ability to support the programs with student enrollment, facilities, faculty, administration, libraries and other resources.



[S.F. 111](#) (2019) authorizes community colleges to offer applied bachelor's programs with approval by the Wyoming Community College Commission. Students enrolled in one of the programs may use the state's Hathaway Scholarship for the equivalent of eight semesters and must meet other criteria. The commission must annually report to the Legislature on the status of the applied bachelor's programs. In addition, the commission must evaluate the financial impacts of the programs on community colleges and the state ([Wyo. Stat. Ann.](#) [§21-16-1303-1305](#); [§21-18-202](#) and [303](#)).

Considerations for State Policymakers

State policymakers may want to pose a series of questions about fundamental issues that could help guide decisions, if they consider establishing community college bachelor's programs. State leaders also can use the questions to revisit existing policies as education goals, demographics and workforce demands shift and more data on the community college bachelor's programs become available.

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 or online learning programs also address the need for specific course offerings or additional bachelor's degrees?
- How will policies avoid competition with four-year institutions, duplication of programs and inefficient use of resources?

PROGRAM APPROVAL AND REVIEW PROCESS

- Which agencies and boards should be involved in the program approval process, and what criteria should be used to approve programs?
- How often should programs be reviewed to ensure they are responding to students' needs and workforce demands?
- What role will regional accreditation agencies need to play in approving community college bachelor's programs?

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 colleges demonstrate they have adequate resources?
- How will costs for bachelor's degrees compare with 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, facilities and instructional resources to support and sustain 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?

DATA AND REPORTING

- What information should colleges provide to demonstrate employer and student demand for particular bachelor's degree programs?
- What data should colleges report related to program offerings, student enrollment, student academic and employment outcomes, and program costs?
- What data should colleges collect and report to ensure the programs continue to meet local workforce needs and statewide educational goals?

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](#)

Additional Resources

Community College Research Initiatives, at the University of Washington and in partnership with New America, is a [two-year project](#) to research and publish reports about community college bachelor's degree programs.

[Increasing Postsecondary Access Through Community College Baccalaureate Degrees](#), (Council of State Governments, 2013)

[Update on the Community College Baccalaureate: Evolving Trends and Issues](#), (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2010)



Appendix A:

Community College Bachelor's Programs: State Policies

The following table summarizes state legislative activity, statutes and other policy resources related to community college bachelor's degree programs.

STATE	YEAR OF INITIAL APPROVAL	LEGISLATIVE ACTION	POLICY CITATION OR RESOURCE
California	2014	S.B. 850 (2014) S.B. 1406 (2018)	Cal. Educ. Code §78040
Colorado	2010	S.B. 10-101 (2010) S.B. 14-004 (2014) H.B. 18-1086 (2018) H.B. 18-1300 (2018) H.B. 19-1153 (2019)	Colo. Rev. Stat. Ann. §23-71-133
Delaware	2015		Delaware Technical Community College's Board of Trustees approved a bachelor's program in October 2015. Meeting minutes are not available online.
Florida	2001	S.B. 1162 (2001) S.B. 1716 (2008)	Fla. Stat. Ann. §1007.33
Georgia	1997		Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia Policy Manual: 2.8 Institutional Mission
Hawaii	2007		University of Hawaii Board of Regents Meeting Minutes (June 20, 2003)
Idaho	1995	H.B. 73 (2017)	Idaho Code Ann. §33-20107A
Indiana	2004		Indiana Commission for Higher Education, Policy on Vincennes University's Role and Mission (As Approved, May 13, 2011) Ind. Code Ann. §21-25 Indiana P.L.2-2007, Sec.266
Louisiana	2001	S.B. 853 (2001)	La. Rev. Stat. §17:1501
Michigan	2012	H.B. 4496 (2012)	Mich. Comp. Laws §389.121
Missouri	2018	H.B. 744 (2018)	Mo. Ann. Stat. §163.191
Nevada	1999		Board of Regents of the Nevada System of Higher Education Handbook, Title 4, Chapter 14, Section 9

STATE	YEAR OF INITIAL APPROVAL	LEGISLATIVE ACTION	POLICY CITATION OR RESOURCE
North Dakota	2006		North Dakota State Board of Higher Education Policy Manual, Section: 409 Degrees Offered
Ohio	2018	H.B. 49 (2018)	Ohio Rev. Code Ann. §3333.051
Oklahoma	2004		Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education Policy and Procedures Manual: 3.2.3 (I)
Oregon	2019	S.B. 3 (2019)	Or. Rev. Stat. Ann. §348.910
South Carolina	2018	H.B. 4931 (2018)	S.C. Code Ann. §59-103-15(4)
Texas	2003	S.B. 286 (2003) H.B. 2198 (2007) S.B. 2118 (2017)	Tex. Educ. Code Ann. §130.302-312
Utah	2012		Utah Code Ann. §53B-16-101 State Board of Regents for the Utah System of Higher Education Policies: R401-4 Utah State Board of Regents (Meeting Minutes ; May 18, 2012)
Washington	2005	H.B. 1794 (2005) S.B. 6355 (2010)	RCW 28B.50.810
West Virginia	1989	S.B. 420 (1989) H.B. 3215 (2008)	W. Va. Code Ann. §18B-3C-8 (2)(J)
Wyoming	2019	S.F. 111 (2019)	Wyo. Stat. Ann. §21-16-1303-1305; §21-18-202 and 303

SOURCES:

Education Commission of the States, [State Education Policy Tracking](#), 2016-2019, and additional policy research.

[Updating the National Landscape: State Adoption of Community College Baccalaureate Degrees](#), (CCRI, University of Washington, 2019).

[Update on the Community College Baccalaureate: Evolving Trends and Issues](#), (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2010).



About the Author

Mary Fulton



As a senior policy analyst, Mary focuses on issues related to postsecondary governance and contributes to workforce development and other postsecondary education policy projects. Mary brings more than 20 years of experience with Education Commission of the States and has worked on numerous K-12 and postsecondary issues during her career. Beyond a commitment to serving our constituents and supporting educational opportunities for all students, Mary has a passion for community service and the arts. Mary can be reached at mfulton@ecs.org or **303.299.3679**.