

NEW BACCALAUREATE SERIES

The Evolving Landscape for New Baccalaureate Degrees in the United States



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DATA NOTE 1 | JANUARY 2019

This first Data Note on the *Scaling Community College Baccalaureate Degrees: The Equity Imperative* research project provides baseline information on relatively new forms of baccalaureate degrees, Applied Baccalaureate (AB) and Community College Baccalaureate (CCB), the reasons colleges adopt these degrees, and the concerns identified by various stakeholders for expanding these degrees to more states and postsecondary institutions. Plans for the two-year project that our CCRI group is engaging in with the Center on Education and Skills at New America (CESNA) on research and dissemination are discussed.

OUR STUDY OF THE EVOLVING BACCALAUREATE DEGREE LANDSCAPE

A decade ago I partnered with Barbara Townsend to co-lead a national study of applied baccalaureate (AB) degree adoption and implementation in the United States (Townsend, Bragg & Ruud, 2009). This study looked at the conferral of AB degrees by predominantly associate and baccalaureate degree-granting institutions, with in-depth study of AB degrees conferred by community and technical colleges, referred to as community college baccalaureate (CCB) degrees. Our study of baccalaureate degrees in these distinct contexts was intentional as we sought to understand factors that contribute to baccalaureate degree expansion, particularly in associate degree-granting institutions in a growing number of states.

Today, our Community College Research Initiatives (CCRI) group at the University of Washington is partnering with New America's Center on Education and Skills (CESNA) to refresh and expand understanding of AB and CCB degrees nationally, looking again at state adoption and implementation of these degrees in the two- and four-year institutional

contexts. With generous support from the Joyce Foundation and Lumina Foundation, our two-year project documents policies and processes; develops a set of consensus design principles and frameworks featuring evidence-based and equity-focused promising policies and practices on state adoption and institutional implementation; and disseminates lessons from past successes and failures. Our joint team will also identify opportunities to spread promising practices based on empirical evidence of the scaling of these degrees since our first national landscape study.

Four distinct but related strands of work that are being carried out by our joint team are:

- 1) Research on AB- and CCB-degree granting policies, institutional adoption, and program implementation by state;
- 2) Evaluation of supply and demand processes supporting existing AB and CCB degrees;
- 3) Evidence-based and equity-focused design principles for institutional leaders and policymakers; and

4) Strategic advisement and communications for states considering the adoption of AB and CCB degrees as well as states seeking to expand these degrees.

A SNAPSHOT OF AB AND CCB DEGREES

AB degrees have grown in number in both two-year and four-year institutions in a wide range of curriculum areas (for example, education, nursing, and various technology specialties) over the last four decades (Townsend et al., 2009). Most AB degrees are offered through transfer and articulation agreements between two-year and four-year institutions, with policies enabling students attending two-year colleges to transfer credits from their associate of applied science (AAS) programs to four-year baccalaureate programs. Whereas the transfer of credits from AAS- to baccalaureate-degree programs is not new (Ignash & Kotun, 2005), the expansion of transfer of credits from applied-degree programs to four-year programs has helped to lay the groundwork for AB degrees conferral by two-year institutions in the form of CCB degrees offered by selected states. These CCB degrees allow students to matriculate from lower to upper division coursework without leaving their home institution, thereby reducing the loss of credit that can happen when students transfer between institutions. This credit loss problem is especially acute for students transferring from AAS degree programs to traditional baccalaureate degrees (i.e., bachelor of science and bachelor of arts) and especially concerning because of the tendency for these programs to enroll higher proportions of historically underserved student populations than other postsecondary curricula, including traditional transfer (McCarthy, 2015).

Looking specifically at growth in conferral of AB degrees by two-year institutions, over the last three decades more states have granted two-year colleges the authority to confer baccalaureate degrees. According to the Community College Baccalaureate Association (CCBA) and other research conducted by our team, 24 states have granted community and technical colleges the authority to confer baccalaureate degrees although not all of these states currently authorize two-year institutions to confer

these degrees. Most notably is the recent change in state statute in the states of California, Colorado, Missouri, and Ohio that authorize two-year institutions to confer AB degrees for the first time or expand AB degree authority in particular program areas, such as nursing in Colorado.

Looking at CCB conferral to date, the two states of Florida and Washington stand out because of their emphasis on scaling AB degrees to the majority of the two-year colleges in their jurisdiction. In both states, considerable brokering took place between the two-year and four-year postsecondary sectors to reach agreement on what degrees would be supported in the community and technical college institutional context. In Florida, state legislation passed in 1999 authorized community colleges to “seek approval to grant baccalaureate degrees in areas of high demand as a ‘last resort’ when partnerships could not be established” (Florida Department of Education, 2005, p. 2). Since that time, Florida has led the nation in scaling AB degrees in the two-year college context, with many of these colleges conferring more than one degree program (Bilsky, Neuhard, & Locke, 2013).

The other state we are studying is Washington wherein 27 of the state’s 34 community and technical colleges currently offer AB degrees, reaching a total of 75 degree programs within the state (personal communication with J. Hammer, November 2018). As the state has moved from legislation authorizing pilot programs to a more mature stage of implementation, Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) reported having over 3,000 head count enrollments in AB degree programs through spring 2017, with the largest enrollment in business, computer and information sciences, and health professions (Kaikkonen, 2017). Whereas this number sounds impressive and does represent steady growth in AB enrollment since their start a decade ago, this number represents less than 1% of total college student enrollment in Washington state. Similar to Florida, the growth of AB degrees in the two-year institutional context remains a rather limited portion of overall college enrollment, even in these bellwether states.

REASONS FOR AB AND CCB DEGREES

The reasons states and institutions adopt and scale AB and CCB degrees vary widely, but many states and colleges attribute their interest in the degrees to developing more talent for the workforce, including in technical fields that are changing and growing and also in geographically remote areas where employers struggle to hire employees with the qualifications they need for their workforce. Another reason for these degrees is to provide opportunity for career advancement for adults who are already actively employed in the workforce, addressing the interests and needs of adult learners who are unlikely to pursue a transfer pathway that requires relocating from their current home and employment.

Though limited in number, studies show students who participate in CCB programs tend to be of non-traditional age and tightly connected to family and employment (Bragg & Soler, 2017; Floyd, Skolnick, & Walker, 2005). Similar to the students in associate-degree programs, CCB students tend to work full-time and also study full-time while attending two-year college to pursue a CCB degree. Bragg and Soler also show students in CCB programs tend to have considerable workforce experience, suggesting their enrollment in CCB degrees is as much about career advancement as initial employment. Recognizing this, some employers offer tuition assistance to encourage their employees to complete CCB programs as a means to retaining them as valued employees. Some employers value the CCB as a mechanism to grow and support the development of a talent pipeline that benefits their firms and their communities.

CONCERNS ABOUT AB AND CCB DEGREES

Considering the expansion of AB and especially CCB degrees, it is not surprising that the expansion of these degrees can be controversial (Ruud & Bragg, 2011). For one, the fact that AB degrees allow for the transfer of credits previously declared non-transferrable and terminal, raises concern for some higher education constituents, including regional accrediting bodies, about mission, degree expansion, and program quality.

Longstanding policies precluding the transfer of applied credits are called into question and overturned, often leading to larger debate about the knowledge, skills and abilities that are necessary for a baccalaureate degree. The extension of this debate to which institutional types whether two- and four-year, are best positioned to confer these degrees complicates the policy landscape even more.

In the 20 or so states that have moved past the point of AB degree conferral by two-year institutions, questions often shift to the larger state landscape where policies on program approval that minimize duplication while still optimizing access come into play. Authorizing predominantly associate degree-granting colleges to confer the baccalaureate degrees requires a myriad of changes to rules and norms governing higher education curriculum and credentialing. Even when these changes are fairly well accepted, the length of time to make changes and the added cost to support these efforts may raise concerns about the viability of these degrees.

OUR NEXT STEPS

In the next few months, our team will be gathering information from states and institutions to document the current status of state policy, program adoption and institutional implementation. Early results of this study will be presented at the Community College Baccalaureate Association (CCBA) annual conference to be held in New York City on February 22 to 24, 2019. Through two presentations, our team will provide updated statistics on state authorization of AB and CCB degrees, institutional adoption and degree conferral, program enrollment, and to the extent possible, student degree completion and employment. This project will continue in the spring and into the fall with deeper analysis of student enrollment and outcomes in the two states of Florida and Washington, due to their extensive scaling of CCB degrees. Ultimately, our team will produce the design principles and framework mentioned earlier, along with other policy- and evidence-based reports and briefs that we will disseminate through meetings and dedicated convenings, our websites, and social media.

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The Community College Research Initiatives (CCRI) group at the University of Washington is partnering with New America's Center on Education and Skills (CESNA) to study AB and CCB degrees nationally.

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Acknowledgment: Scaling Community College Baccalaureate Degrees: The Equity Imperative *research is funded by the Joyce Foundation and Lumina Foundation. This work is licensed to the public under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 license (see creativecommons.org), which governs the Terms of Use. You are free to copy, display, and distribute this work, or include the content in derivative works, under condition that the work is fully and properly attributed to the authors and to the Community College Research Initiatives, University of Washington.*

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Suggested citation: Bragg, D. D. (2019, January). *The evolving landscape for new baccalaureate degrees in the United States* (New Baccalaureate Series, Data Note 1). Seattle, WA: Community College Research Initiatives, University of Washington.