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When Community Colleges Offer a Bachelor's Degree

A Literature Review on Student Access and Outcomes

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Introduction

College can seem out of reach for many students who perceive a bachelor's degree as unaffordable and unattainable. It is no surprise, then, that students from the top socioeconomic quintile enroll in college more than 50 percentage points more than students from the bottom quintile and are much less likely to first seek an associate degree.¹ For many low-income students, students of color, and adult students, the pathway to a bachelor's degree begins at a community college. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC), only 23 percent of students who began at a community college and attended exclusively full time were able to transfer and complete a bachelor's degree within six years.² Transfer and graduation rates are much worse for the majority of students who attend part time and they are stubbornly dismal for Black, Native American, Latinx, and low-income students.³ A variety of transfer interventions (articulation agreements, guided pathways, university centers, credential stacking, and others) have done some good but the COVID-19 pandemic only worsened the state of transfer.⁴ It is clear that transfer is not working for many community college students who want bachelor's degrees.

And it makes sense that about 80 percent of community college students aim to earn bachelor's degrees.⁵ The bachelor's degree remains the main entry point to the middle class. Americans without these degrees are especially vulnerable to economic downturns.⁶ Coming out of the Great Recession, almost 75 percent of new jobs went to bachelor's degree holders.⁷ But many students, especially those in rural areas, live in education deserts, where access to bachelor's degrees is limited.⁸ And even where there are colleges and universities in the area, sometimes this is an "opportunity mirage,"⁹ where there are higher education opportunities but students can't access them due to cost, program capacity constraints, work, or caregiving responsibilities or other challenges facing adult and non-traditional students.¹⁰ Students need options to further their education that are accessible to them where they are, with the resources and time that they have.

One solution to these issues that has become more popular in recent years is allowing community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees, often in high-demand and applied fields. Bachelor's degree programs offered by community colleges don't just expand access, they do so in a way that fills critical equity gaps facing adult and working learners, rural students, and those who began at a community college and want to continue where they started.

But allowing community colleges to deliver bachelor's degrees is controversial. Higher education leaders and those in state legislatures fear mission creep, duplication, low quality, and undermining traditional colleges and universities.¹¹ The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of the research on

the community college bachelor's degree (CCB),¹² with a particular eye to questions of equity, labor market returns, student outcomes, quality, and whether these programs address key choke points and widen access to the bachelor's degree and economic stability.

History and Growth of Community College Bachelor's Degrees (CCBs)

With little fanfare, states began authorizing community colleges to confer baccalaureate degrees over three decades ago. West Virginia was the first state to authorize an associate-dominant institution to award both associate's and bachelor's degrees.¹³ By 2021, one or more associate-dominant institutions, more commonly called community colleges, were approved to confer baccalaureate degrees in 24 states.¹⁴ Among these, Florida and Washington State are recognized as having scaled up baccalaureate degrees to all or nearly all of their associate-dominant colleges.¹⁵

CCBs are awarded by community and technical colleges that have historically conferred associate degrees as their highest credential. CCB-conferring colleges remain associate-dominant but have added the bachelor's degrees to their portfolio of degrees offered. While CCB degrees can be offered in a wide range of fields, they are typically focused on programs of study that are critical to local and regional economies where community college students live and work.¹⁶ CCBs explicitly seek to transform career technical education (CTE) designed to terminate in non-degree program certificates and associate degrees into baccalaureate pathways and provide a path to the baccalaureate in programs of study that have not prioritized transfer in the past.¹⁷ To resolve inequities, CCB programs offer a solution to complement and bolster transfer and improve postsecondary attainment nationwide.

One of the first studies to be published in 2009 on CCBs by Barbara Townsend and her colleagues Debra Bragg and Collin Ruud noted CCB programs tend to be built on curricula considered “terminal” by the higher education systems.¹⁸ Terminal education refers to occupationally focused programs whose goal is to exit graduates to employment rather than transfer them to universities. In focusing on employment, terminal programs often omit coursework that enables students to transfer on track to attain a baccalaureate without substantial loss of credit and increased cost.

In a study of terminal education in North Carolina, Mark D'Amico, Cameron Sublett, and James Bartlett II noted a higher percentage of these students come from economically distressed counties than traditional transfer students do. They observed the transfer of terminal education students is “an issue of equity and social and economic mobility” in that state (and likely in others) and that transfer and articulation agreements do not adequately address the continuing education of “terminal” degree holders.¹⁹ Given the likelihood these students are more demographically diverse than students enrolling in traditional transfer programs, failure to provide pathways to baccalaureate attainment is problematic to improving equity in higher education.

Yet another factor contributing to CCB policy adoption is cost. In their 2019 report updating the national landscape for CCB degrees, Deborah Floyd and Michael Skolnik cited research gathered from community college leaders who argued CCBs are not only more affordable, but also more geographically accessible and conveniently delivered to working adults.²⁰ Research by Debra Bragg and Maria Claudia Soler and Lia Wetzstein, Elizabeth Meza, and Debra Bragg that showed working adults are a primary audience for CCB degrees because they enable students to continue working while paying lower tuition and fees in pursuit of the baccalaureate.²¹ By offering programs close to home and work, students can continue working and do not have to defer income that comes with attending college in close enough proximity to work to retain employment. Interviews with working students pursuing CCB degrees to advance in their current careers also revealed leaving employment—often full-time jobs—was antithetical to achieving their goal of baccalaureate attainment, many had to work to pay for school and meet the needs of themselves and their dependents.²²

Finally, these degrees help a state to increase bachelor's degree production and expand the workforce mission of community and technical colleges.²³ The most common CCB programs are in high-demand areas such as business, education, and health professions.²⁴ By serving a new population of students in these high-need areas at the bachelor's level, the degrees can increase educational pathways for professional and technical associate graduates who have faced barriers to applying credits toward a bachelor's degree.

In recent testimony in Washington State, Sheila Edwards-Lange, president of Seattle Central College, said, “almost 600 students a year enroll in our programming courses. These students intend to transfer and continue in computer science, but what we hear from them is that the programs they want to transfer to are constrained and hard to get into.” But, she said, “many end up transferring in other fields. That is a loss for them and the companies that want to hire them.”²⁵ Community colleges that offer bachelor's programs to welcome students like those at Seattle Central support their career development in the communities they call home.

Controversy about CCBs

Perspectives on CCBs are by no means all positive. Though these programs are more commonplace now, higher education leaders hold a range of views on the role of community colleges in providing bachelor's degree programs.

Recognizing the potential to upend established higher education norms, Michael Skolnik described the decision of community colleges to confer CCB degrees as “one of the most significant additions imaginable to the mission of these institutions.”²⁶ He acknowledged tensions between community colleges and universities when the notion of CCB degrees is advanced.

Echoing this concern, a 2019 national survey of higher education leaders revealed a contrast in views on the necessity for CCB degrees among university and community college presidents.²⁷ University leaders worried about community colleges drifting away from their open-access mission and duplicating upper-division programs and degrees. Community college leaders saw CCB degrees as a way to increase access to affordable baccalaureate degrees, defending the mission of reaching students who would not transfer to get a baccalaureate degree.²⁸

Some university leaders including leaders of regional broad access colleges and universities claim that CCB degrees are a form of mission creep that allow community colleges to drift away from their historic open-access mission.²⁹ Efforts to reform the credentialing authority of community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees in terminal education programs is controversial. The preponderance of university leaders responding to a Gallup Poll conducted for Inside Higher Education in 2019 believed community colleges should continue to focus on transfer rather than confer baccalaureate degrees, while community college leaders claimed more baccalaureate options were needed to meet changing student needs.³⁰

Both groups agreed that transfer is important to improving access to baccalaureate degrees, and they agreed on the need to strengthen transfer, but they differed on the need for baccalaureate degrees at the community college level to address transfer issues. A recent skirmish in California over the approval of new degrees illustrates this concern. Several proposed CCB proposals have been held up over claims that the programs are too similar to programs offered at California State University campuses: a cyberdefense and analysis program at San Diego City College and an ecosystem restoration and applied fire management program at Feather River College, for example.³¹ While the negotiation between sectors continues to play out in California, many states' approval processes specifically address duplication and use coordinating boards to settle disputes.³²

Community college baccalaureates are less expensive for students. In a 2022 study of 10 CCB-authorizing states,³³ Ivy Love and Iris Palmer found that half required CCB institutions to keep upper-division tuition level with lower-division tuition, and one state requires level tuition for the majority of its colleges.³⁴ In three of four states included in this study where colleges are allowed to charge higher tuition for upper-division courses, average upper-division in-state tuition is higher at public universities than at community colleges.³⁵ Furthermore, community colleges are able to capitalize on existing facilities and equipment. However, there are potential added costs of securing regional accreditation, expanding libraries, and hiring faculty with doctoral degrees.³⁶ As Jeremy Wright-Kim has suggested, community college leaders should be aware that CCB programs may not improve the institutional bottom line, with extra stress possible in the initial years of a new CCB.³⁷

A study by Justin Ortagus and Xiaodan Hu suggests that community colleges that adopt CCB degree programs that amount to more than 10 percent of their program offerings raised tuition rates by about 25 percent.³⁸ This study raises questions about whether community colleges can offer CCB degrees without raising tuition for not only CCB students but other students who attend these colleges. However, the researchers are unable to attribute cost to specific aspects of attendance, such as coursework in the lower- or upper-division area of the undergraduate curriculum. It may be the case that these colleges are charging more for upper-division coursework, bringing their cost in line with other local options. California pilot program students cited affordability as the number one benefit of the CCB.³⁹

Another controversy manifests in the worries of university leaders about students and other constituents' confusion over CCB degrees appearing similar to university bachelor's programs when they are not. Complaints about unclear messages about CCB degrees have been lodged in California and Washington State, for example.⁴⁰ If baccalaureate degrees conferred by community colleges are substantially different or of lesser quality than university baccalaureate degrees, CCB graduates will be disadvantaged compared to university baccalaureate graduates. To this point, Debra Bragg and Maria Claudia Soler looked at the perceptions of CCB graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programs of study, and found they were uncertain about whether their degrees would secure well-paying jobs when competing with university bachelor's degree-holders.⁴¹ However, Gabriel Petek found no evidence of quality issues in 15 California programs studied and Potter found little evidence of quality concerns among employers.⁴² Furthermore, Elizabeth Meza and Debra Bragg and an earlier study by Melissa Biber Cominole found similar employment and wages between university and CCB grads.⁴³

Perhaps the thorniest issue has to do with direct competition between sectors. Broad access colleges and universities, such as local state colleges and

universities and for-profit institutions, may feel that CCBs will threaten their enrollment. Using Florida data, Dennis Kramer, Justin Ortagus, and Jacqueline Donovan studied whether CCB degrees negatively impact university baccalaureate attainment and found this was not the case.⁴⁴ The presence of a local CCB program had a positive effect on bachelor's degree production at nearby public universities. Rather than reduce university baccalaureate attainment, CCB degrees boosted attainment at public universities. The researchers did report a negative effect on bachelor's degree production at nearby for-profit universities, however, suggesting that CCB degrees may reduce market share for for-profit institutions. The extent to which CCB degrees increase attainment of associate and baccalaureate degrees among public community colleges and universities would appear to be a win for the entire higher education system.

Finally, researchers and policymakers have raised concerns that with stretched budgets, the implementation of CCB degrees, especially in Hispanic-serving and other minority-serving institutions, might inadvertently decrease attention on minoritized and marginalized students by shifting resources and focus to baccalaureate degree students, effectively trading one inequity for another.⁴⁵ This concern deserves attention, and along with the questions about potential increases in tuition, should continue to be monitored by researchers and policymakers.

While there is still much to learn, a growing body of research has addressed some of these concerns and illuminated who enrolls in these programs and how they fare. The sections below summarize the role of CCBs in bachelor's program access and CCB graduate outcomes.

Evidence on CCBs and Access to Bachelor's Degree Programs

One of the big hopes for CCBs is that they will expand access to baccalaureate education to a more diverse population of students. Available research suggests that they do. Quantitative data make it clear that students who enroll in CCB programs are highly diverse. Many have attended college before, and some have completed an associate degree before starting their CCB program.⁴⁶ Students in CCB programs in Washington and Florida are older and more racially and ethnically diverse than their university counterparts.⁴⁷ CCBs in Washington show a higher percentage of Black and Latinx graduates and a lower percentage of Asian graduates compared to similar university programs.⁴⁸

In other ways, CCB students are more diverse than community college transfer students and mirror students that are in community college workforce programs. For example, they are more likely to be veterans, receive financial assistance, and have dependents.⁴⁹ In a previous analysis of student demographics in Florida and Washington, Elizabeth Meza and Ivy Love found Florida graduates to be 57 percent female (right on par with bachelor's graduates nationally).⁵⁰ Under half, approximately 42 percent, were people of color, and 47 percent were 30 or older. Students who enroll in Washington's CCB programs are older than other community college students—32, on average, compared to 23 for the state's community college students overall.⁵¹ Students in California pilot programs were less racially diverse than the overall community college population, with students slightly more likely to be white or Asian, but they were also more likely to be receiving financial aid than the general student population.⁵²

We have found some variation based on program. In Washington, students in STEM programs are younger and more white and Asian than students in other programs, suggesting these programs are picking up more traditional students who are pursuing degrees that have competitive admissions requirements and limited space in local universities. This is the case, for example, in computer science.⁵³

While CCB students, across multiple programs, tend to be older than the average community college student, little is known about the trajectories and experiences of young adults who use CCBs to further their education. More research is needed to understand programs that draw younger students and why young students might opt for a CCB pathway as opposed to attempting traditional transfer.

In terms of gender, females made up a similar percentage of university and CCB graduates in Washington. Historic gendered patterns in occupational fields like health care and education hold true among graduates in both community

colleges and universities, though we found a strong representation of women in business that is promising, given their underrepresentation in the past.⁵⁴

In interviews with 17 CCB students and graduates in Washington, students described being drawn to the CCB for a number of reasons, including affordability, already having a connection to the college and feeling comfortable there, convenience of location, and the opportunity to pursue a career pathway that would lead to an in-demand occupation.⁵⁵ The number one reason students in California's CCB pilot program gave for pursuing a CCB was affordability.⁵⁶ Many students we interviewed said that they did not think they would have pursued a bachelor's degree if the community college option wasn't available. This sentiment was echoed by the students in California's pilot colleges where 51 percent of respondents agreed they would not have pursued a bachelor's degree outside of the CCB option. In a follow-up study in California, 56 percent of students said they would not have pursued the bachelors outside of the community college.⁵⁷

Given the relatively recent emergence of CCB degree programs in many states, more research is needed to describe who enrolls in CCB programs and to help ensure that they are meeting the needs of the populations they seek to serve. However, early evidence suggests that CCB degrees are opening bachelor's degree options to a new group of students.

Examining whether CCB degrees increase baccalaureate access and equity, Marcela Cuellar and Patricia Gándara reviewed literature citing the intention of CCB degrees to expand access to bachelor's degrees among first-generation, low-income, and racially minoritized students.⁵⁸ Their qualitative study involved community college leaders in six colleges in three CCB-conferring states. Cuellar and Gandara wrote that CCB degrees do strive to improve access for low-income students, but they found less convincing evidence that they focus on increasing baccalaureate attainment for racially minoritized students. They concluded that CCB degrees are a potentially valuable policy tool to advance socioeconomic mobility for low-income students, but lack clear equity plans and specific efforts to increase access to baccalaureates among racially minoritized students. Given claims that CCB degree advocates make, Cuellar and Gandara recommended strengthening outreach and support from community colleges conferring these degrees, a recommendation echoed by Edna Martinez, who identifies an equity "missed opportunity" when equity and pedagogy are not centered within the degrees, and instead are focused solely on access to solve equity concerns.⁵⁹

In their study of the CCB in California, Hai Hoang, Davis Vo, and Cecilia Rios-Aguilar conclude that "CCBs have provided an affordable, accessible pathway to baccalaureate attainment for older students, first-generation college students, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students experiencing homelessness, students with disability, students impacted by the foster care system, student veterans, and students of color."⁶⁰ They also point out that

demand for CCB degree programs remained high, even through the pandemic, and it rose, despite declining community college enrollment overall, an observation echoed by Wright-Kim. This suggests that students see the value of the bachelor's degree and they value the access and flexibility provided at community colleges.⁶¹

Evidence on CCB Student Outcomes

Perceptions of CCB Degrees

From the start of CCB degrees in the United States, researchers and practitioners have written about the importance of applied degrees that prepare graduates for employment, going so far as to label these degrees “workforce baccalaureates.”⁶² Some studies have solicited the opinions of employers on the value of CCB degrees and their willingness to hire CCB graduates. Malcolm Grothe interviewed students and employers about these degrees in Washington and found students expected CCB degrees to result in employment in well-paying, training-related jobs.⁶³ Employer views were similarly linked to the workforce, including expressing a goal of retaining students in communities that might otherwise lose the talent needed to operate local businesses.

Echoing these results, a later qualitative study found that student and employer perceptions of CCB degrees were generally positive.⁶⁴ Employers say CCB graduates who work for their companies possess knowledge and skills immediately applicable to their jobs and also career advancement.

Contrasting with these findings, Bragg and Soler found university personnel were much more skeptical of CCB degrees, questioning their comparability to university baccalaureate degrees and wondering if CCB graduates would struggle to get jobs or experience lower wages. How students access CCBs and what they—and potential employers—expect to gain from these programs is a worthy focus of research.

Completion Outcomes

Students who earn a CCB degree show strong program completion outcomes. Analysis of Washington State using the last three years of available data shows that 68 percent of students who started a CCB program completed within four years of beginning the program.⁶⁵ Comparing this completion rate to that of students who transferred to public universities in Washington in the same years produced similar results: the completion rate of students after they transferred was 70 percent, compared to the 68 percent for CCB graduates, both favorable rates of completion.⁶⁶ In California, CCB pilot students were more likely to graduate than CSU transfer students.⁶⁷ Once admitted to a CCB program to begin upper-division coursework, 67 percent of students obtain a bachelor’s degree in two years; 78 percent complete in three years.⁶⁸

Employment Outcomes

Evidence in Florida seems to calm worries about employment for CCB graduates.⁶⁹ CCB graduates showed strong rates of employment and continuing education that were similar to peers with associate degrees in similar areas of study. In fact, 83 percent of baccalaureate graduates were employed four quarters after graduation. However, the employment rate varies by credential level and program of study.⁷⁰ When looking at Florida graduates' employment rates by race and ethnicity four quarters after graduation, Ivy Love observed similar rates between associate graduates and baccalaureate graduates. Black baccalaureate graduates had employment rates three percentage points higher than their peers who earned associate degrees, the greatest difference between associate and bachelor's level for any racial/ethnic group. While differences between credential levels are relatively small for all groups, Indigenous, Asian American, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students had lower employment rates than peers at both credential levels. More research is needed to understand this discrepancy and suggest ways to better support these graduates' trajectories into the labor market.

Looking at the employment of CCB students in Washington compared to university graduates' employment in similar programs, Meza and Bragg found CCB graduates had a higher employment match rate than university graduates in the first and fourth quarters after graduation, and a comparable match rate by the 12th quarter.⁷¹ Research from the Washington SBCTC also showed high employment of CCB graduates, with the highest levels of employment for nursing and other health care graduates.⁷² Data show the employment rate of CCB graduates was 75 percent, compared to 69 percent of university graduates. In the fourth quarter, CCB graduates showed a 77 percent match rate, compared to the 70 percent match rate of university graduates. By the 12th quarter, however, the gap between the groups had closed, with both groups of graduates showing a match rate of approximately 70 percent. It is possible that CCB students graduated with more labor experience, which boosted their wages in initial measured periods. Findings from these two states demonstrate that overall employment rates for CCB graduates are strong. In addition, CCBs seem to be a good access point for students of color, though these degrees do not rectify long-standing inequities of pay in the labor market.

Wage Outcomes

In one of the few studies examining employment and earnings for CCB graduates, New America, in 2020, secured data from the Florida Department of Education to compare wages for CCB and associate degree graduates in similar programs of study.⁷³ Love compared the earnings of CCB graduates to associate

degree graduates in the fourth quarter after graduation, learning that CCB graduates earned about \$10,000 more in annual wages.⁷⁴

Here, too, earnings gains varied by program and race/ethnicity, as well as by gender. A larger wage gain was found from the associate degree to baccalaureate degree for men than for women in computer and information sciences, communications technologies, business, and health care, including nursing. A similar wage gain was found for men and women in visual and performing arts. Black and Latinx graduates demonstrated a higher associate to baccalaureate wage gain than Whites in education and nursing, but all three groups showed a similar wage gain in computer and information sciences and business. These results show that employment and earnings vary by program, race/ethnicity, and gender, pointing to the need to analyze labor market outcomes by program and demographic characteristics. However, we do not know how CCB graduates' earnings compare to those of baccalaureate graduates from primarily-baccalaureate-granting institutions.

Turning to Washington State, where longitudinal data have been gathered on graduates since the time CCB programs were implemented, Darby Kaikkonen found high employment for CCB program graduates from 2009 to 2017, ranging from 80 percent to 92 percent by program area.⁷⁵ Of all CCB graduates, health care graduates showed the most consistent and high employment rate and also exhibited the highest median earnings, approximately \$92,000 annually in the seventh and eighth year after CCB completion. Though computer and information sciences was a relatively new CCB program at the time of Kaikkonen's study, these graduates ranked second to health care on median earnings at two years after completion, at nearly \$58,000 in median annual earnings. Business CCB completers lagged behind the other two program areas in early post-graduation earnings but showed median earnings of nearly \$63,000 by the eighth year after graduation. This study did not compare labor market outcomes of CCB graduates to university bachelor's graduates.

Drawing on a subset of data from the 2017 Kaikkonen study for additional analysis, Darby Kaikkonen and Christopher Quarles studied employment and earnings among Washington CCB graduates compared to associate degree graduates in the same program a year after completion.⁷⁶ Using propensity score matching, they found a difference in earnings between CCB and associate graduates in all three program areas, with the highest earnings gain in health care for CCB graduates, at \$23,848. The CCB graduate earnings gain was more modest in technology and social science.

Using longitudinal data from Washington, Cominole estimated the causal effect of earning a CCB degree on employment and earnings one year past graduation.

⁷⁷ Her dissertation compared labor market outcomes for CCB and university baccalaureate graduates while accounting for geographic proximity. Among other variables, Cominole found CCB nursing graduates were about 33 percent

more likely to be employed than university baccalaureate nursing graduates at one year after graduation. CCB business graduates were about 8 percent more likely to be employed than university business graduates during this same time period. Fixed effects regression results show no significant differences between CCB and university graduates in hourly wages one year after graduation for nursing and business. Seeing no negative effect to earning a bachelor's degree from a community college on employment or earnings, Cominole concluded that there is little evidence supporting claims of CCB degrees as inferior to university degrees on the basis of measured labor market outcomes.

Meza and Bragg were interested in how CCB graduates fared compared to students who graduated from one of seven regional universities in Washington in a similar program. Comparing programs by six-digit Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) code and drawing on data from UI wage records, we found earnings tended to be higher for CCB graduates in the first quarter post-graduation than university graduates of similar programs of study, perhaps due to their older age or greater work experience. However, follow-up data over three years suggest university graduates catch up and sometimes slightly exceed CCB graduates in some fields. The researchers did not find statistically significant differences in wages between graduates of universities and CCB programs in any of the four program areas studied at either one quarter, one year, or three years after graduation.⁷⁸

Looking more deeply at health care, a field of study that was identified from the start of Washington CCB policy as critical to growing the state's labor force, we saw that the earnings of CCB graduates were slightly lower than university graduates based on the three quarters of UI wage data we had available. This result may be influenced by the fact that the university group included a large number of nursing graduates, whereas the CCB group included a substantial number of nurses but also graduates of programs in radiation and imaging, dental hygiene, respiratory care, public health, and community health. This difference in health care program composition might contribute to wage differences between CCB graduates and university graduates,⁷⁹ though more research is needed for a more definitive conclusion.

In Florida, earning a CCB provides students with a substantial wage boost over those who earn an associate degree in a similar program,⁸⁰ a finding consistent with other analysis.⁸¹ CCB graduates also show strong employment rates and wages, a finding consistent with previous research.⁸² CCB graduates initially earn slightly more than university graduates in similar programs, but the gap seems to narrow over time. The concern that CCB programs may not be viewed in the labor market as of the same quality as university programs is not obvious in the data examined.⁸³

In California, no official wage data are available to link CCB graduates to employment, but a survey of graduates show students who completed degrees in

2018 reported their salary as of September 2019 to be \$28,000 higher than their salary prior to enrolling in their bachelor's degree programs. For students who graduated in 2019, their current annual salary was on average \$12,000 higher than prior to their enrollment in the pilot programs. Two-thirds of graduates reported that their bachelor's degree helped them to obtain their current position.⁸⁴ Another group of researchers looked at students after the pilot programs and found that 2020 graduates reported a significant increase in income after earning a bachelor's degree; on average, students earned \$18,400 more, a 37 percent increase.⁸⁵

Opportunities for Future Research

There are a number of opportunities for research around the emerging policy area of CCBs. While research in the two states that have expanded CCBs to all-or almost all-community colleges, Florida and Washington, should continue, it is important to add more states to the analysis of access, completion and labor market outcomes. Calls for better labor market information on college graduates are already common in higher education,⁸⁶ but this information is especially critical for CCB programs where preparation for good jobs is a stated goal.

Outcomes of CCB programs disaggregated by gender, race/ethnicity, age, and other demographic characteristics are also important, given the importance of ensuring more equitable outcomes in baccalaureate attainment for underserved populations in higher education. Now that these degrees have been expanded in several states, researchers should look at the impact they have on baccalaureate degree production at the state level and for specific demographic groups. Cuellar and Gandara argue that the early stage of development and implementation of CCB degrees may facilitate “equity-oriented strategies” that could improve baccalaureate completion for underserved populations, especially racially minoritized students, who are often concentrated in community colleges.⁸⁷ We recommend research on factors affecting CCB program completion, labor market outcomes, and other effects not yet studied, for example time to degree and educational pathways to the CCB for diverse student populations. This research will be useful to states, higher education systems, and community colleges considering adopting CCB degrees, as well as students who are considering attending these programs.

Conclusion

Today's college students are often older and more racially and ethnically diverse than in the past, and they may be working one or more jobs, raising families, and struggling to make ends meet. The postsecondary education systems that were built years ago for more traditional students are, in many cases, in need of revising. The COVID-19 health crisis drove home the urgency of this situation, creating increasing demand for flexible and adaptable ways to access higher education. One access point, among other solutions, is the community college baccalaureate. Students are increasingly demanding the kind of flexibility these models offer. And increasing baccalaureate attainment is a goal for many states.

Our review of the literature show that CCBs are expanding access to the baccalaureate and offering students a chance at the labor market returns that come with it that they may not have enjoyed without the community college option. The demographics of CCB students and graduates indicate that the introduction or broadening of CCB authorization may have potential to support more students of color, women in nontraditional fields, older students, and those with dependents.

Our analysis suggests that health care, IT, and business programs, at a minimum, have offered new opportunities for students and that the programs provide strong employment and earnings outcomes as compared to an associate degree or a baccalaureate from a regional university. Expanding CCBs could go a long way toward increasing the number of Americans with degrees and addressing racial and class disparities. Creating more opportunities for Americans to experience those benefits could be as simple as letting more college students finish where they start.

Notes

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- 2 Shapiro et al., *Tracking Transfer*.
- 3 Shapiro et al., *Tracking Transfer*; and Gloria Crisp and Anne-Marie Nuñez, "Understanding the Racial Transfer Gap: Modeling Underrepresented Minority and Nonminority Students' Pathways from Two-to Four-Year Institutions," *Review of Higher Education* 37, no. 3 (2014): 291–320, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2014.0017>.
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