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**Community College Applied Baccalaureate Degrees:
A Powerful Strategy for Workforce Development**

Perspective
Should Community Colleges Confer Baccalaureate Degrees?
Overview of Arguments For and Against

By

Anahid Petrosian, MPA, Ph.D.
Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs
South Texas College, 3201 W. Pecan Blvd., McAllen, TX 78501
Tel: (956) 872-6097
E-mail: Anahid@southtexascollege.edu

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Overview

The issue of whether or not community colleges should be allowed to confer four-year college degrees cannot be studied in a vacuum. Rising costs of higher education coupled with accessibility and more stringent admission standards in many universities have made earning a 4-year college degree beyond the reach of many aspiring American students. Additionally, virtually every newly created job, as well as many existing employment opportunities, now require a 4-year college degree for entry-level positions. Community colleges provide a significant number of students the opportunity to seamlessly transfer into an applied bachelor's degree. In doing so, community colleges not only contribute to the students' advanced technical skills, but also could provide them with supervisory and managerial skills demanded by employers.

Furthermore, expanding access to bachelor's degrees is essential in keeping United States competitive in a global economy. Over the years, the United States has lost its ranking in the educational attainment level of its young population. In 1998, the United States ranked first in the percentage of its population aged 25 to 34 with college degrees; however, as of 2012, it had dropped to 14th place among industrialized nations (*Education at a Glance: OPCD Indicators, 2012*). To stay competitive in the knowledge-based global economy, businesses in the United States need access to employees with bachelor's degrees. To expand access, over 20 states (www.accbd.org) have expanded community college degree granting authority to include baccalaureate degrees.

Historical Perspective

Development of baccalaureate degrees by community colleges accelerated in 1998, when requests from community college's to confer baccalaureate degrees escalated and the Higher Learning Commission created a taskforce to study community college baccalaureate degrees. One major recommendation offered by the taskforce members was that community colleges should be permitted to confer a small number of baccalaureate degrees and that such offering would not change the colleges' traditional mission (The Higher Learning Commission, 2001).

The policy paper *Community College Baccalaureate Degrees: A New Delivery Model for the Future* (Cook, 2000) was published and the conclusions reached by the author were that financial pressures, changing demographics, and employers' needs were the main reasons that have compelled community college leaders to confer applied baccalaureate degrees (Cook, 2000). In the same year, to identify barriers to baccalaureate education and develop strategies to address these obstacles, the American Association of Community Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities conducted a survey of their memberships (Access to Baccalaureate Degree, 2003). The major obstacles noted by the participants of the study were as follows:

- Reluctance of the senior institution to accept credits from AAS degrees
- Overall difficulty of transfer of credits between two-year and four-year institutions
- Special needs of non-traditional students, which include students' need for flexible class schedules, academic support, advisement, and financial aid
- Distance preventing graduates of community colleges in geographically isolated areas to transfer to a university sometimes hundreds of miles from their jobs and families
- Increased cost of upper-level education at universities

In 2004, *Improving Access to Baccalaureate* was published by the American Association of Community Colleges. One of the recommendations offered by the authors of this study was that local and state policies need to change to allow development of applied baccalaureate degrees to address the needs of adult learners for baccalaureate attainment (American Association of Community Colleges, 2004). The conclusion reached from analyzing the data in this report was that most states have selected this option to address challenges of access, cost, and capacity (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2004).

Another research initiative sponsored by Lumina Foundation (2008) studied the challenges faced by adult learners and cited applied baccalaureate degrees as one option to baccalaureate degree attainment. Researchers conducted a state-by-state inventory of states that confer such degrees. Conclusions reached by Townsend, Bragg, and Ruud (2008) were that higher education institutions must develop programs to ensure that adult learners have access to baccalaureate level education.

Rationale for Applied Baccalaureate Degrees

The rationale for the development of Applied Baccalaureate (AB) degrees by community colleges has centered around three national concerns. The first important concern was the need to expand access to baccalaureate degree attainment for adult students (Floyd & Walker, 2009; Townsend, Bragg, & Ruud, 2008). Another concern was the need to address employers' call for employees with bachelor's degrees (Jacobs & Dougherty, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Floyd & Walker, 2009; Postsecondary Education Opportunity, 2007). Finally, the national concern regarding the increasing cost of higher education, especially at public four-year universities, was an important driving force for development of AB degrees (Chen, 2008; Dickeson, 2006; Floyd & Walker, 2009; United States Government Accountability Office, 2007).

Expansion of Access to Baccalaureate Degrees. One-third of students attending community colleges are enrolled in occupational programs and they graduate with Associate of Applied Science degrees. Furthermore, it has been documented that students graduating from occupational programs encounter obstacles and difficulties when transferring to four-year universities (American Association of Community Colleges, 2004; Silverberg, Warner, Fong, & Goodwin, 2004). In response, AB degrees have been developed by community colleges to provide a seamless pathway to baccalaureate degree attainment for students graduating with occupational degrees (Bragg, Townsend, & Ruud, 2009; Floyd & Walker, 2009).

Workforce Needs for Global Competitiveness. An important force driving the development of AB degrees, especially in the workforce area, has been the increasing demand by regional employers for employees with bachelor's degrees (Jacobs & Dougherty, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007). Furthermore, in many occupations, associate degrees are no longer sufficient to meet the needs of employers. Employers are requiring the bachelor's degree for entry-level positions and for career advancement (Floyd & Walker, 2009; Ignash & Kutun, 2005; Jacobs & Dougherty, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Postsecondary Education Opportunity, 2007).

Rising Cost of Higher Education. According to *Measuring Up 2008*, the overall cost of higher education has increased in all sectors of higher education in the United States (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008). Even though overall cost of higher education has increased in all sectors, the cost increases at community colleges have been less than the cost increases at four-year public universities (Bemmel, 2008; College Board, 2008; United States Government Accountability Office, 2007). The Government Accountability Office (2007) examined trends in higher education tuition and enrollment and reported several important findings. Overall, more students attend community

colleges instead of four-year universities. The trend indicates that enrollment of minority students, especially Hispanics, has shifted from four-year universities to community colleges. According to the report, even though tuition and fees have increased in all higher education sectors, community colleges have the least amount of increase (United States Government Accountability Office, 2007). The increased cost of tuition at public universities, coupled with increase in undergraduate entrance requirements, has placed attaining a baccalaureate degree out of reach of the majority of students who attend community colleges (Cook, 2000; Dickeson, 2006; Floyd & Walker, 2009).

Arguments For Community Colleges Conferring Applied Baccalaureate Degrees

Advocates of Community College Applied Baccalaureate (AB) degrees have argued that expanding the mission of community colleges to confer a bachelor's degree is a natural response by community college leaders to meet the changing needs of the communities they serve. Supporters state the following arguments *for* community colleges conferring bachelor's degrees:

- **Community Colleges will Remain True to their Mission.** Expanding the mission of the community colleges to confer bachelor's degrees continues the community college mission to serve the needs of their local communities. Community colleges have been created to meet the needs of their local population, and local employers and to prepare their citizens for work by expanding access to higher education (Cohen, 2003; Floyd et al., 2005).

Over 20 states have authorized community colleges to confer bachelor's degrees. A review of their program conferring indicates that most colleges' bachelor's programs constitute less than 10% of their overall program offerings. Therefore, community colleges have stayed true to their mission of offering certificates, associate degrees, and transferable courses, in addition to offering developmental courses to serve their community.

- **Pathway to Bachelor's Degrees for Students that Graduate from Career Programs.** One-third of students enrolled in community colleges are enrolled in career programs and they graduate with AAS degrees. Students encountering obstacles and difficulties when transferring to 4-year universities has been extensively documented (American Association of Community Colleges, 2004). In response, the AB degrees have been developed to provide a seamless pathway to bachelor's degrees for students graduating with AAS degrees (Bragg, Townsend, & Ruud, 2009; Floyd & Walker, 2009).
- **Applied Baccalaureate Degrees are a Strategy to Prepare a Competitive Workforce.** To stay competitive in the knowledge-based global economy, businesses in the United States need access to a college-level educated workforce (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007; The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008).
- **Colleges are Meeting the Demand of Businesses to Improve Workforce Preparation.** One major reason for the development of AB degrees in the workforce area has been the increasing demand by regional employers for employees with bachelor's degrees (Jacobs & Dougherty, 2006; National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007).

In many occupations, associate degrees are no longer sufficient to meet the needs of employers. Employers are requiring a bachelor's degree for entry-level positions and for career advancement (Floyd & Walker, 2009; Ignash & Kutum, 2005; Jacobs & Dougherty, 2006; Jenkins).

- **Community Colleges are Less Expensive and More Flexible, Accessible, and Responsive.** It is in the best interest of the nation for community colleges to expand the role of community colleges and provide students **access** to bachelor's degrees. The benefits include geographical access to higher education, a lower cost, and an increased **responsiveness** to student and employer needs (Walker, 2005).

By utilizing existing facilities, faculty, and staff, a community college has the potential of **lowering cost** for baccalaureate education (Bemmel, 2008; Cook, 2000).

Students attending community colleges are older compared to students attending universities and most of them work while attending college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). For many of these students, leaving their community and job in order to get a bachelor's degree is not an option. Therefore, the AB has the potential of **meeting the needs of place-bound students** (Cook, 2000; Floyd & Walker, 2009).

Non-traditional students have a higher chance of succeeding at community colleges because of small class sizes and a wider array of classes with **flexible** schedules. Given the chance, most students would prefer to continue their education at a local community college to earn a higher degree (Bragg, Townsend, & Ruud, 2009, Walker 2001).

Arguments Against Community Colleges Conferring Applied Baccalaureate Degrees

Opponents of the Community College Applied Baccalaureate (AB) degrees state the following arguments *against* community colleges conferring baccalaureate degrees:

- **Mission:** Community colleges will abandon their traditional mission and limit remedial and developmental education at their institutions (Eaton, 2005; Pederson, 2005)
- **Cost and Duplication:** Community colleges will divert resources from two-year programs to fund their four-year degrees.
 - Faced with limited funding, community colleges will stop offering remedial education in favor of baccalaureate education (Cook, 2000; Glennon, 2005).
 - There is a significant cost associated in receiving accreditation to confer baccalaureate degrees incurred by upgrading library holdings, equipment, and increasing faculty credentials. Such costs have the potential of raising tuition and fees across the entire college population (Glennon, 2005; Pederson, 2005).
 - Colleges will duplicate programs offered by universities.
- **Quality:** Community college baccalaureate degrees might be perceived as second rate as compared to the traditional university bachelor's degree.
 - Students who graduate from community colleges with a bachelor's degree may not be as prepared as graduates from traditional universities.
 - Colleges that confer bachelor's degrees will change their focus to research rather than teaching.

For the past four decades, over 20 states have authorized community colleges to confer bachelor's degrees, and therefore, there is significant evidence to counteract the opponents' concerns regarding mission creep, cost, and quality.

The Mission Creep argument has been the most important concern against community colleges conferring bachelor's degrees. Since their inception in early 1900, community colleges have stayed true to their mission. During the last century, the organizational structure of community colleges has changed, mainly in response to the changing needs of the communities they serve (Townsend & Dougherty, 2006;

Vaughan, 2006). During the 1950s, programs offered at community colleges expanded to include technical programs and contract training. During the 1970s, there were external forces that influenced the expansion of program offerings at community colleges to include adult education (Townsend & Dougherty, 2006). During the last decade, community colleges' program offerings in several states has expanded to include bachelor's degrees (Floyd et al., 2005; Walker, 2009).

Community colleges are still offering remedial and developmental education, certificates, transferrable courses, and now targeted bachelor's degrees. In many states, the bachelor's degree programs conferred by community colleges constitute less than 10% of their program offerings, which indicates that community colleges have not abandoned their original mission but have expanded their mission to meet new needs of their community.

Opponents also state that, by conferring bachelor's degree programs, community colleges will eventually increase costs for all students by raising tuition to pay for the upper-level courses. However, there is no evidence to support this assertion. Community colleges have maintained their low tuition rates. Even though overall cost of higher education has increased in all sectors, the cost increases at community colleges have been less than the cost increased at four-year public universities (Bemmel, 2008; College Board, 2008; United States Government Accountability Office, 2007).

Texas Experience

The Texas experience, and specifically that of South Texas College, provides additional evidence that supports the development of the bachelor's degrees by community colleges.

In 2004, after considerable discussions and debates, Texas reluctantly authorized three of its 50 community colleges to confer applied baccalaureate degrees in select disciplines. The key factors that contributed to the success of bachelor's degrees developed by three community colleges in Texas were student need for baccalaureate degrees and workforce need for employees with baccalaureate degrees (Petrosian, 2013).

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) had legitimate concerns about the quality of the proposed programs in community colleges. Additionally, two-year colleges faced stiff competition from Texas universities in surrounding communities because they were competing for limited public funds for higher education and for enrolling students from a finite pool of college ready youth.

Program Quality. The bachelor's degree programs developed by South Texas College have been scrutinized several times by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to ensure program quality. Below are two specific site visits by external experts commissioned by THECB with the charge to assess the quality of bachelor's degree programs conferred by South Texas College:

- In 2007, under the oversight of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, several external reviewers representing doctoral granting institutions from Colorado and Nevada and industry representative from Texas, visited South Texas College to review the quality of the bachelor's degree programs. **The report submitted to the THECB stated that the new bachelor's program at STC was comparable in quality to bachelor's degree programs offered by other higher education institutions in Texas.**
- In 2009, the THECB organized another external review with representatives from doctoral granting institutions from Missouri, Washington, and Northern Iowa. **The report submitted by the reviewers to the THECB stated that there was no indication that any of the**

colleges were abandoning their traditional community college mission or were siphoning resources from existing programs.

Access and Student Success. By conferring bachelor's degree programs, South Texas College has expanded access to baccalaureate degrees for the community that it serves. Between 2007 and May 2016, over 1,000 students have earned bachelor's degrees with a notable number of them choosing to pursue post baccalaureate degrees at Master's level and beyond. The critical success indicators are presented below:

- In less than 10 years, over 1,000 Students have graduated from South Texas College with a bachelor's degree
- They have completed their program with
 - **High Persistence Rates** (over 80% of them returned each semester);
 - **High Completion Rates** (over 88% of students with an associate degree completed their bachelor's degree within 3 years);
 - **High Placement Rates** (over 80% of the graduates have been placed in jobs);
 - Twenty (20) percent of graduates have continued their education to earn master's and some pursuing their doctoral degrees.

Conclusion

The success of Applied Baccalaureate programs conferred by community colleges is a testimonial to the commitment, flexibility, and perseverance of many community colleges across this nation. Community colleges that confer bachelor's degrees have been able to successfully meet the educational and subsequent gainful employment needs of nontraditional students who otherwise may not have the resources or ability to attend a traditional four-year university.

Presently, South Texas College plays a notable role in South Texas in increasing college attendance and degree attainment of nontraditional and home-bound students in the communities it serves.

About the Author:

Dr. Anahid Petrosian, Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs Division, South Texas College

Dr. Anahid Petrosian serves as the Interim Vice President for Academic Affairs Division at South Texas College. She has been with the College for over 20 years and has served in many capacities. Initially as a faculty member, as the chair of the Public Service Administration and Business Administration programs, and then as the Assistant Vice President for Academic Advancement. Dr. Petrosian currently oversees STC's instructional divisions, curriculum development, professional development, distance education services, dual enrollment programs, and the academic excellence programs. She has extensive experience working with higher education institutions including The University of Texas at Austin and Texas Tech University.

Dr. Petrosian holds two bachelor's degrees in Marketing and Accounting from The University of Texas at Austin, a Master's degree in Public Administration from the University of Texas-Pan American, and a Doctorate of Philosophy degree in Management from Northcentral University. Dr. Petrosian has published the following articles:

- *Petrosian, A. (2014). "Business Administration and Management". In R.W. Holmes (Ed), Completing the Dissertation (p. 99-100). Bloomington: Authorhouse.*
- *Petrosian, A. (2013). Administrator and Faculty Perspectives Regarding Community College Baccalaureate Degrees in Texas. Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 37:10, 735-741. DOI: 10.1080/10668926.2011.567177.*
- *Petrosian, A. (2010, Fall). Community College Baccalaureate Movement in Texas. Journal of the New Comprehensive College. 2(2), 9-15.*

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