

Tracking the growth of CCB degrees in the U.S.

New results and important perspectives

During this insightful webinar, CCBA and Bragg & Associates reviewed the impressive growth of the nation's CCB degree programs and compare research from 2021 to new findings gathered in 2023 including: which CCB programs are growing the fastest, where they are located, and who is graduating from the longest-running CCB programs by college geography and student demographics.

A panel of experienced practitioners and researchers shared diverse views on these findings and independent perspectives regarding the future of CCB degrees including:



Our Panelists

Dr. Elizabeth Meza, Senior Research Scientist, University of Washington

Dr. Kathleen Plinske, President, Valencia College

James "Jim" Reed Jr., Executive Director, Illinois Community College Trustees Association

Dr. Kathleen Plinsky from Valencia. From a President's perspective, what does some of this data mean to you? Does it have implications for you?

Kathleen Plinske: Yeah, thanks so much. And thanks for the invitation to be part of the discussion. The data really is exciting. And I'm really proud to represent the State of Florida today, and the great work. That all 28 colleges in the system have done.

I was taken aback, really, by how focused all of our baccalaureate programs are on meeting workforce needs. And that's not a surprise to me in the State of Florida. But it's really interesting to see the national perspective and see how much alignment there is in terms of

those workforce areas in which each of us have chosen to offer baccalaureate programs. I think that alignment with local community needs and with local workforce needs is so critical.

I also think that one of the elements that successful baccalaureate programs have at the community college level is this idea that it's complementary to the university system and not competitive. So, for example, in the State of Florida, the approval process really requires the support of the university system. And, in Florida, what we have come to realize together is that there's more need, there's more demand than any one institution can possibly respond to. So, for example, when we offered our Bachelors of Science Degree in nursing, it was really at the request of our local university, the University of Central Florida, who convened the half dozen community colleges in the region and asked for help in meeting the community's needs for baccalaureate prepared nurses.

And then, finally, I'd just like to underscore what you showed in your demographic data. One of the things that we see at Valencia College is that our baccalaureate students and our baccalaureate graduates really closely reflect the demographics of our local community as you would expect at a community college. We also see that our first generation students are overrepresented in our baccalaureate programs. So, we are confident that our baccalaureate programs are really providing a critical point of access for so many students in our community.

Dr. Elizabeth Meza, from a researcher's perspective. What does this data say to you?

Elizabeth Meza: Well, thank you so much for having me, Angela. And this work is just really exciting because, as you have mentioned, there has not been this kind of analysis, particularly of graduates, before. So we initiated the inventory a few years ago. But, the graduate analysis is totally new, and so are some of the smaller levels of analysis that you were able to present today. I have quite a few notes that I took for myself as a researcher about this new information. What I think was really smart is the way that you broke down the growth here across the four dimensions of states, colleges, programs and students.

The headline is that 24 States offer community colleges. But really, when we look at who those States are, and the fact that Texas and California are coming online with lots of new colleges and lots of new programs, many more students are being served. That's an opportunity to really grow these CCB programs, even though there's been a slight stagnation in the number of states that are offering the programs. We're really able to meet the needs of so many more students.

With the growth in these really large states that have four really large racially minoritized populations, I find that to be really important as a researcher. The other thing I'll mention again is the number of Hispanic serving institutions, and how successful these institutions have been at serving Hispanic students within the programs. So, as a researcher, I really want to keep an eye on that and understand a little bit more about the students in the CCB degree

programs, why they chose the programs, and the extent to which they really are a different population than students who are being served in traditional colleges and universities.

And finally, I was really interested to see the biggest growth in programs about education and computer/information sciences. Those are two super in demand fields that no one can really argue against providing at a community college level. I'm really hopeful to see those programs growing and especially serving racially minoritized students. I am just as excited for what the future holds for these degrees and our upcoming CCBA conference, which I hope you're all able to attend. We're going to present even more research in Savannah, so I hope to see you all there.

Jim Reed, Executive Director of the Illinois Community College Trustees Association, as a state that's been working several years now to try to get CCB approval, what does this data say to you? Does this data give you hope? How are you going to use this data?

Jim Reed: Well, thank you for having me on the webinar today and I really want to thank Dr. Kersenbrock, Dr. Cicotti and all the CCBA staff for your leadership. I also want to thank the Joyce Foundation for their support, the willingness to to be a part of this process in Illinois, and the work that Dr. Bragg and Tim Harmon have done. I think there are two words that really come to mind when I look at this data. The first one is overwhelming and probably the second word is enlightening. Let me start with the first in terms of overwhelming because as we have started this work 2019 when it became very clear that those states that don't have CCB programs have pretty clear lines of demarcation when you start talking about wanting to bring the community college baccalaureate into your state. So, it is really helpful to have this kind of data to, not only bolster and support the rationale for starting the CCB, but also to really dispel the number of the rumors and misinformation that is out there. In looking at the data, we found quite a bit of that. Dr. Bragg made reference to a *Frequently Asked Questions* document which I would certainly encourage all of you to review. We've got one document that is specifically tailored to Illinois. But certainly, as you look at that, it does help with things like Dr. Plinske talked about in terms of dealing with misperceptions that we're going after the same students, age wise as the public universities or or that CCB programs are not able to address workforce needs. So, the data is really helpful. As we have had conversations about what's the role and mission of community colleges, the arguments seem very territorial because of either concerns about enrollment or other things. So this data is overwhelming but enlightening to see. Other states have been able to successfully implement the community college baccalaureate so making the argument to policymakers and others that Illinois should follow suit.

Jim, how do you think that you will use this data to work with your state's legislative approval?

Jim Reed: We are really going to break it down. So, as covering lobbyists for nearly 20 years and especially union lobbyists, we have a three prong approach. The first approach was really

to agitate, the second was to educate, and finally the third was to advocate. The agitation phase is probably not the traditional way you think of when coming from a union lobbyist. But it's really just a question. So, the question would be that if 24 other states are doing this and doing it well, why shouldn't Illinois be doing it also? Then, we take the data to create the educational piece and break apart the larger FAQs and put them into bite size pieces that legislators can understand. By doing this, the legislators can begin to wrap their heads around these things and can even take back to their public universities. Ultimately, we want to partner with the public universities. This should not be an adversarial effort. We want to let them know what the data shows, not only the community colleges, but also the public universities, the state, and for our workforce efforts. For the advocacy part, we will bring in our stakeholders, not only in higher education, but also those in the workforce to make the case that this is in the best interest of the State of Illinois.

Dr. Elizabeth Meza: Is there additional data that you wish that you had?

I think that's just an evolving process. Part of it will come from the conversations we have. I think certainly the information that has been presented by Dr. Bragg about the impact on communities of color is important as we begin to work with the city colleges in Chicago and other areas.. But I think that it is necessary for the legislators to see that not only the impact statewide, but what specific underserved communities are being impacted and how it's uplifting those folks to be able to get community college to get baccalaureates otherwise have not been able to get that. So that's an important piece for us in Illinois. additional pieces that you think

Dr. Elizabeth Meza: Would you discuss what other data is needed?

I think there's a couple of other demographic groups that we're interested in, including age, for example. So, that might be interesting to know. I've been working a little bit with data from Texas recently and it looks like the students in Texas are actually trending younger compared to students in Washington and Florida. So that's interesting. It would be good to know what's going on there?

We're always interested in labor market outcomes, of course, and Dr. Bragg and I have done quite a bit of work in that area along with others. That is something that we're keeping an eye on. Of course, I know that CCBA has done a lot of work around the quality of degrees. How do you show that a community college baccalaureate is a quality program. What are the markers of that? So, that's something to keep an eye on as well and it really has not been researched very much. Another area that has been under researched is time to degree. But just from an intuitive perspective, I think that students who enroll in CCB programs have a fairly quick time to degree. That data would be interesting to document because the time to degree combined with the affordability is a double benefit of the degree. Students can get it quickly and affordably. Those are the things off the top of my head. I'm sure I could come up with a much bigger list. If anybody out there is interested in brainstorming, writing your dissertation, or interested in doing research, I'd be happy to chat more about what I think is needed.

Dr. Kathleen Plinske: It is interesting with Florida and Washington having so many CCB colleges already, they are considered CCB program leaders. Texas is also becoming a CCB program leader. What do you think this data offers these colleges that have had CCBs for some time?

Dr. Plinske: I think it reinforces our idea of looking for additional baccalaureate pathways that could be helpful for our students. As I mentioned, we currently offer a number of the programs that are most popular. But I am really interested to look at other colleges' baccalaureate offerings, just to see if there might be alignments and a good fit for our particular community and our particular workforce needs. I think it's really important to consider the context of higher education today. Think about how much media attention there is to the student debt crisis and the amount of student loans that our students are taking across the country. For many students and their families, they have come to believe that higher education is just simply out of reach. And I think many students don't even try to enroll. One of the talking points that we use often at Valencia College is that the tuition cost is actually less than the cost of the meal plan at any university you might attend. So, it is really important to work to debunk the myths about the costs of college, and stress that a student can earn an entire bachelor's degree, really, without taking on any debt whatsoever.

I also think it's important to remember that so many of our baccalaureate programs are really serving working adults. As colleges are considering offering baccalaureate programs, it is important to remember who we are. First and foremost, as community colleges, we are experts at developing those programs that respond to our students' needs and offering those programs in a flexible way. That really reflects the lived realities of our students. Therefore, as we add baccalaureate programs, we must ensure that we are staying true to our mission and offering those baccalaureate programs in that same sort of flexible pathway that allows working adults to continue their education.

Dr. Angela Kersenbrock, CCBA President: One of the quality indicators that CCBA has identified is flexibility and serving the needs of working learners is a major component of that flexibility.

Dr. Debra Bragg, President of Bragg and Associates: You have been so involved in this research and have such a heart for it. What do you think is still needed? Also, which of these pieces of data are you most pleased to see?

Dr. Bragg: That is very nice to say. There are a lot of people on this webinar who are leaders in this work including all of the participants and panelists. I'm really interested in learning more about who the students are and how they're doing. What is really happening to the students who are enrolled and completing these programs. I very much hope that we can use these data to move past some of the potential conflicts that our colleague, Jim Reed, has described.

In many new states that are considering adopting the degrees it seems like there's a lot of time, effort, and stress wasted on conflict that need not occur.

If you look at the numbers here. These are very targeted efforts to meet student needs and help these students move through baccalaureates in a cost effective way to get good jobs that can support their families, contribute to economic prosperity, and the communities and regions that they live in. If we don't have a need for that today. I don't know when we ever will. So, I very much hope that we can help dispel some of the myths that have come up. Jim mentioned using the FAQ document. I'm delighted to see the work that Tim Harman is doing to make that great big document into bite size chunks for our legislators in Illinois. Hopefully, we can do some of that work elsewhere.

There's a lot of research going on and we have just touched on a little bit of it here. That's really exciting to see.

Dr. Kathleen Plinske: Florida and Texas both offer the \$10,000 baccalaureate degrees. Could you talk about that from the perspective of how it occurs in a community college to offer this \$10,000 degree? What has that meant for your students?

Dr. Plinske: In Florida, we've held tuition flat for the last decade. At Valencia College our tuition per credit hour is \$103 per credit hour at the associate level, and about \$140 at the baccalaureate level. So it's not a lot more cost for the baccalaureate degree. It's still less, of course, than the university level. So mathematically, there's actually not much we have to do to stay underneath \$10,000 for the entire cost of the degree. For certain programs with high costs, we've looked at other strategies to keep the costs under \$10,000. For example, dual enrollment pathways which are at no cost to the student, and therefore reduces the tuition costs at the front end of the degree. For upper division courses, there are often employer sponsorships. And as I mentioned, we have so many working students. For example, with our nursing students. It's actually a rare exception to find a student who doesn't have their tuition fully covered by their employer.

Similarly, our business and organizational leadership degree was developed in partnership with Walt Disney World. Disney was looking for every one of their supervisors and managers to have a bachelor's degree but they weren't looking for a high end finance-based business degree. They were looking for a degree that had more human resources built into the program. So, at Valencia College, we were able to customize the content to really respond to the employer's needs. Disney has a wonderful program for their hourly employees called Disney Aspire that will cover the tuition costs for their employees who are pursuing their education. So I do think that a particular area of focus and emphasis is really looking at the impact of employer sponsored tuition programs and with which institutions of higher education they're partnering. I think that community colleges need to be aggressive to remain in that space or it would be possible for local employers to perhaps partner with other

institutions that aren't necessarily local, and really sort of cut community colleges out of what we do best, which is responding to our local community needs.

Dr. Plinske: CCBA has recognized that an element of quality is aligning with industry. For example there will be representatives from IT, healthcare, construction and public safety at the conference this year to talk about why they've partnered with their local community college for baccalaureate degrees. Would you say that it is true that the students who come to you are coming for the purpose of getting a better job or getting a career advancing in their career?

Kathleen Plinske: I think largely it's true and becoming more and more true. I've seen that shift over the last decade. I think a decade ago there were many students who thought, you know, I'll just go to college, and, as long as they get a degree, everything will just sort of work out. I think, because again, of the student debt crisis and what we're seeing in terms of perhaps a misalignment between what employers are looking for and what credentials the students are earning. I think students and parents are starting to question what the value of a college degree is. I also think that our students are becoming more pragmatic in their approach to higher education. The community college baccalaureate will become even a more attractive option particularly as it does align more closely with jobs that are in high demand in the local community.

And I will say I was, I worked in the Illinois system for just about a decade. I served as the interim president of McHenry County College in 2009-2010, and will say that I was quite the skeptic about community college baccalaureate degrees. I was convinced that it would detract from the Community college mission that somehow it would detract the focus that we have on serving community college students. What I've learned over the last 13 years in the Florida system is that community college baccalaureate degrees are not in any way a detraction from our mission. In fact, the very students who you imagine as community college students are the ones pursuing baccalaureate degrees at the community college. There is no sort of misdirection of focus. It simply allows the very students that we are best positioned to serve to continue their education and earn the credential that our local employers are seeking. So I wish that I could go back in time and have that conversation with myself. I have completely converted my thinking and can see how incredibly powerful these pathways are for our students, and how many doors they really do open up. This is particularly true for our students but not just their first job or their next job, but for a really better career.

Dr. Elizabeth Meza: You have researched the motivations of community college students. Have you found similar scenarios that Dr. Plinske discussed in your work?

Dr. Meza: Dr. Bragg and I, along with some colleagues at New America, interviewed community college baccalaureate students through a grant through the Strata Foundation. One of the main motivations that they have is career advancement. They often also

mentioned affordability in terms of their choice of a community college baccalaureate degree location as another factor. A lot of students already have ties to the community college and want to stay in their local community. They are comfortable in this setting. They can navigate the community college and are already integrated with the faculty members. They also look for the workforce focus of the degree. There is often a capstone course that they've heard about and they're interested in taking for the employment aspect. The CCB degree fits in with their lives and their lived experiences which is really huge for them.

Dr. Bragg, do you want to say anything else as you have also interviewed a lot of students and about their motivations?

Dr. Debra Bragg: I would also point out that Tim Harmon is doing research on student motivation. One of the things I would say is that we underestimate our students. I've been extremely impressed with the students that I've interviewed and the impact these individuals are having, particularly those who graduated, have been promoted, and are moving into important jobs in their organizations. They often work in service to their communities. These are critical people and positions. It is important to recognize that we need to tell that story better. Dr. Meza and I will be doing some new research in Washington interviewing students in rural areas who really are fulfilling some really important leadership roles in their communities. So we're excited to do that.

But I want I we there's an issue we haven't touched on. I'm hoping my colleague, Timothy Harman, will talk about the work he's going to be doing.

Timothy Harmon, president of Workforce Enterprise Services, Inc: We are just getting started with this work. We've talked about the work in Illinois with Dr. Bragg and Jim Reed about sorting out the barriers to accessing the CCB. We've also done some work on education deserts which we haven't talked about. But it is very interesting in terms of access to baccalaureate instruction in different parts of the State of Illinois. You might think of Illinois as a place that's just simply covered with baccalaureate schools. But really it isn't. And so that's been interesting.

What I think that Dr. Bragg is really referring to some work that I have been doing about times and modes of instruction. We have a lot of data about how much it costs to go to college. We know where schools are, so we can look at education deserts, but we haven't really done much work on times of instruction and modes of instructional delivery. And so I've begun some work in Illinois, looking at some dyads of community colleges and associated universities, to observe in a structured way the differences in times of instruction. It is an important problem, because time and distance obviously relate to each other. But we're trying to meet the needs of working students, which data has shown that two-thirds of community college students are working, with many of those are working full-time. So if we're trying to meet the needs of working students, we have to find ways to do that that go beyond just

providing affordable instruction. Instruction needs to be in places that they can commute to but at times and in modes of delivery that fit their lives. An example is the asynchronous online format that many community colleges specialize in doing. And so we're trying to shed a little bit of a quantitative light on that issue as well. We are hopeful to see what this research shows so stay tuned for more information about that additional aspect of access that we want to explore.

Dr. Angela Kersenbrock: There are several big events coming up. The CCBA national conference is February 14-16 in Savannah. Dr. Bragg will host a pre conference and will be sharing a lot of CCB research. Dr. Bragg is also working with the Great Lake states to confer CCBs. Dr Bragg, would you talk about this work?

Dr. Debra Bragg: Tim Harman, Jim Reed and I have been working with the Great Lake states thanks to the funding of the Joyce Foundation and collaboration of CCBA to gather data on baccalaureate attainment policies in these states. We have interviewed individuals from states that confer bachelor's degrees and those that are not yet doing so. We're now looking at a second round of interviews to go a little deeper, and planning a virtual convening that will be held on April 23. We thank Emily Goldman from the Joyce Foundation who has been a great partner in this work. This work will give us a really interesting opportunity to look at one region of the country. Ohio is scaling up very rapidly and Michigan has conferred degrees for quite a long time. But then we have some interest in other Great Lake states.

I'm always optimistic. But we are excited to be able to delve really a little bit more into the kinds of workforce issues, the kinds of higher education policies that really influence us regionally in this country. There is a regional aspect to this baccalaureate degree movement that we're interested in learning more about. So we hope you'll join us because we think it'll be super interesting.

Dr. Angela Kersenbrock: I want to put a nice, thank you out to our funders who have taken us in just a few short years from a very small association to, I will say, a teenage association. Thank you to the Joyce foundation for really believing in us so early on.

ECMC has also been a great partner. Thank you all for your support and your guidance. I must also thank Ascendium who has been a real partner also with the quality project. Thank you all.

I cannot forget Strada who is another great partner. We just want to thank you all for picking up the phone when we call, and having really thoughtful conversations with us about how together we can move this forward. So thank you all. And I want to give a very big thank you to Dr. Deb Bragg, Dr. Elizabeth Meza, Dr. Kathleen Plinske, and Jim Reed for being with us today and letting us subject you to all of this data, then putting you on the spot by asking you what you think of the data, and how you gonna use it. Each of you have risen to the challenge so

beautifully. Dr. Angela Kersenbrock CCBA: it was a great decision to have each of you there. So thank you all.

Dr. Kathleen Plinske: I'd just like to share really briefly, a very quick story that Dr. Bragg's comment reminded me of underestimating our students. I met a student actually during the pandemic who took 16 years to earn her associate degree. She was taking one class at a time while raising five children and working full time 16 years. So by any IPEDS measure, she's a failure, right? No, I cannot think of a better example of extraordinary success. Because of that success, she found the courage to continue on for her bachelor's degree in business and organizational leadership at Valencia, and completed the degree after her kids had all moved out of the house. She enrolled on a full time basis and completed her third and fourth year, if you will, of her bachelors degree in two years. So it was certainly an unconventional student and on a non-traditional path. That does not mean in any way, shape or form, that our students are any less well prepared or or deserving of these opportunities. But I'm just so proud to work in a community college where we create the context and the opportunities for students in this case, like Jennifer, to thrive and to pursue her dream. So thanks, Dr. Bragg, for reminding us how incredible our students are.

Dr. Elizabeth Meza: Dr. Meza do you have anything you'd like to close with?

Dr. Meza: On the theme of what students say, one thing that we did hear in the interviews is how appreciative the students are of the faculty members and the administrators at their colleges. They related how they felt like these individuals were partners in their learning, and have included them as experts and co-teachers in the field oftentimes. So they're acknowledging the prior learning and knowledge that the students come into the classroom with. The students really recognize that and have shared this with us. How grateful and how thankful they are for that opportunity. So, thank you to all the practitioners, faculty members, and administrators out there who prioritize the students' lived experience and prior knowledge.

Jim Reed: Any last words, Jim?

I just want to say, thank you for letting me be a part of this movement. I really think of this as a movement. It's similar to the education funding reform that we did back in Illinois at the level and sort of feels like that. I want to thank the trustees across the state that have really taken this on as a priority, and the community college presidents that have embraced it and have been willing to let us educate them about this initiative. Thank you to those staff members and faculty we are beginning to have conversations with and educate them about how this can be a benefit for their students and for their communities.

Dr. Angela Kersenbrock: Thank you to our panelists, practitioners, administrators, and staff. You are really changing higher education in this country. Please look on the [CCBA website](#), in our newsletter, or social media for the next webinar. I hope to see you in Savannah!