**Obtaining Your Bachelor’s Degree at a Community College**

Updated March 11, 2014 | by [Grace Chen](http://www.communitycollegereview.com/articles/authors/1)

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Learn about the growing trend of obtaining your bachelor's degree in community college.

In recent years, community colleges have been experimenting with baccalaureate degree programs. With great success, many states are now encouraging community colleges to offer bachelor’s degree programs, as they promote the acquisition of higher education for the greater public, while also providing degree programs in an increasingly wide range of majors and subject areas.

**The Growing Trend**

While baccalaureate degrees were traditionally only earned through a university or four-year institution, a drastic shift began to occur in the 1990s. At this time, the Community College Baccalaureate Association (CCBA) sought to change this tradition, and devised the mission statement that they intended to: "promote the development and acceptance of the community college baccalaureate degree as a means of addressing the national problems of student access, demand, and cost.” In support, The American Association of Community Colleges has also recognized the community college baccalaureate as, “an emerging development in higher education.”

The reason community college baccalaureate degrees have become so popular is threefold. First, community colleges are able to respond to increased workforce needs more quickly than four-year institutions. For example, increased demand in recent years for qualified healthcare workers, such as nurses, has led to explosive growth of bachelor degree programs in nursing at the community college level. Secondly, community colleges have been able to respond to economic pressures facing students and communities because, on average, community colleges are far less expensive than four-year institutions. And lastly, community colleges have been increasing the accessibility of higher education by making degree programs more affordable and manageable than traditional universities. Many community colleges offer classes at night when the working public can come to campus for class. Additionally, community colleges were among the first institutions of higher learning to adopt online and distance learning methods, making their classes even more accessible.



Because of this, the number of community colleges that confer bachelor’s degrees is steadily growing. According to [data from the CCBA](http://www.accbd.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/ConferringInstitutionsUS.pdf?ct=US&stp=WA), nineteen states have baccalaureate-degree conferring community colleges. Degrees in education, health, science and math, business, and law enforcement are the most common degrees available. Florida currently has the most community college baccalaureate programs by far. However, [recent news](http://www.mercurynews.com/education/ci_25178226/bachelor-degrees-from-community-colleges-california-horizon) that California’s two-year college system is considering a move to offer bachelor’s degrees would place that state at the top of the list of having the most two-year institutions offering four-year degrees.

**Responding to Workforce Needs**

In responding to increased workforce needs, a growing number of potential employment opportunities now require a bachelor’s degree, which makes the job market more competitive than ever. In a recent study conducted by the federal government’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, the highest paid careers in the nation all require at least a four year-degree. These high paying professions include jobs such as airplane pilots, engineers, physician assistants, and many others.

In addition, the Bureau of Labor Statistics also notes that many of the jobs listed as “the ten fastest growing occupations from 2002 to 2012” are among the highest paying jobs today. The jobs with the most [potential for growth through 2022](http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_table_103.htm) are listed as careers in the medical, mental health and technology sectors. Since the job market now requires a four-year degree for most [profitable careers](http://www.communitycollegereview.com/articles/12), community colleges have quickly responded to this trend, and they are working to make the baccalaureate degree more attainable for their students. Also, community colleges are simultaneously responding to the great pressure to provide students with programs that can ensure employment in fields of great need upon graduation.

**Responding to**[**Economic Pressures**](http://www.communitycollegereview.com/articles/13)

Traditionally, universities that offer bachelor’s degrees are known to be highly expensive. Not only are tuition expenses costly, but so too are related expenses like those for room, board, fees, supplies and other expenses incurred by going to college. Added up, traditional baccalaureate programs can become economically inaccessible for many students rather quickly.

Since many students struggle to [afford university costs](http://www.communitycollegereview.com/articles/3), some students would complete their prerequisite studies at a community college, and then [transfer to a four-year institution](http://www.communitycollegereview.com/articles/14) after a year or two. As the California legislature explains, “In some, but not all, geographic regions, baccalaureate degree programs are being delivered successfully at the local community college through agreements between the community college and four-year postsecondary institutions within or outside of the state.”

To respond to this economic and social trend of transferring credits and sharing programs, states are now allowing community colleges to issue bachelor’s degrees because it further expands “access to baccalaureate degree programs through the use of community colleges,” according to the California Performance Review.  Ultimately, instead of forcing students to [juggle costs](http://www.communitycollegereview.com/articles/16) of transferring, students can now complete programs at their initial college, making the whole undergraduate experience both more affordable and convenient.

Also, since community colleges are growing in popularity, some states, such as California, provided a reduction in enrollment fees at various community colleges. As a result, “more students find receiving a community college education more accessible and affordable, which leads to increased enrollment,” according to the Lompoc Record.  Also, many students realized that with the reduction of fees and costs at a community college, compared to a university, a student can take more courses at one time, instead of having to spread out a program to balance the costs of tuition and expenses. As a result, the lower cost, “allows students to take more classes which in turn speeds up the whole college experience,” as explained by the Lompoc Record. Instead of graduating in four years, for example, a student might only need three to three-and-a-half years to complete a bachelor’s degree.

**Increasing the Accessibility of Four-Year Degrees**

As more states are granting community colleges the authority to incorporate baccalaureate programs in their academic offerings, many state legislators are speaking out about the social benefits of such great shifts.

In 2001, the Florida legislature granted a public community college, St. Petersburg, the authority to issue bachelor’s degrees, while providing the explanation, “The Legislature intends to create an innovative means to increase access to baccalaureate degree level education in populous counties that are underserved by public baccalaureate degree granting institutions.” Essentially, because many traditional four-year programs are often inaccessible, the state legislator argued that all community members should have the equal opportunity to earn baccalaureate degrees, which in turn would allow community members access to more job opportunities as well. This argument is applicable to rural states, such as North Dakota, as well. With a high need for workers in the energy industry and not many four-year colleges in the state, the North Dakota legislature granted Bismark State College the authority to confer a bachelor’s degree in energy management, a degree that can be obtained completely online.



In addition, since many traditional universities are not only inaccessible for some community members, but also require relocation, community colleges are offering a more convenient and local approach to the earning of a baccalaureate degree. Essentially, according to the California Performance Review, “Establishing new and creative bachelor degree programs at community colleges is a strategy to increase college participation rates for local residents who are unable to relocate because of family or work commitments.” Ultimately, making baccalaureate degrees more affordable, while diminishing the drastic requirements of relocation, baccalaureate programs are growing in popularity. As evidenced by the popularity of the online energy management program in North Dakota, online coursework is a popular option for many students pursuing bachelor’s degrees at the community college level.

**Conclusion**

While community colleges will never take over the role of four-year institutions in the American educational system, they most certainly can fill a much-needed niche of preparing workers for highly technical and in-demand jobs. Especially in the healthcare and technology fields, community colleges prepare students quickly to enter the workforce and make an immediate impact. Furthermore, community colleges are much more apt and able to meet the financial needs of students by offering classes at a lower tuition rate. Without the associated costs of relocating, community college becomes even more affordable. And the convenience of online courses make baccalaureate studies at a community college a great option for today’s students.