**[Baccalaureate Programs at Community College: A Wise Investment in Our Community, Our Economy, Our Future](http://www.oaklandpost.org/2017/07/13/baccalaureate-programs-community-college-wise-investment-community-economy-future/)**

***By Jowel C. Laguerre, Ph.D., Chancellor, Peralta Community College District***

It is known that community colleges nationwide provide the most practical point of educational access for many students.  As the cost to attend California’s public universities rise, more students and their families rely on local community colleges to save tens of thousands of dollars. Compared to all higher education institutions, community colleges teach 46 percent of all postsecondary students.  There are about 1,200 such institutions in the country. Though a recent entry in higher education, (just about one hundred years ago) our community colleges have become an integral – and essential – part of affordable and accessible higher education.

If you study the history of higher education, you will see that over the years, our college curricula have evolved considerably.  Harvard is no longer the institution it was on September 8, 1636 when it was founded.  Nor is U.C. Berkeley, the University of Chicago, or the University of Kansas or California State Hayward the same institutions they were when they were founded.  Each institution has taken on greater responsibilities to meet the growing needs of society.

As with all segments of higher education, our community colleges are evolving.  Since the early 2000’s, community colleges in Florida started to offer bachelor’s degrees. Starting last year, some community colleges in California also started offering four-year degrees.  This new venture is not only following the trends of community colleges all over the country, but meeting critical workforce needs where access is lacking.  There are critical needs in the economy wherein four-year institutions are not prepared to offer certain degrees or training.  The community colleges are a perfect post-secondary fit to provide this opportunity.

As President of Solano Community College, I worked with faculty in the Biotechnology program to apply for one of fifteen slots to offer a Bachelor’s degree in Biomanufacturing.  Solano College was granted this bachelor’s degree function.  Students all across Northern California and beyond will have access to this program, thanks to community support, the ingenuity of the faculty and state-of-the-art facilities funded by the voter-approved Measure Q Bond.  These fifteen programs in the state were a pilot that is supposed to sunset in the next few years.

The fact that over thirty colleges applied for one of the fifteen slots indicated that offering bachelor degree programs would be promising.  The success of the fifteen colleges to develop non-duplicative bachelor’s degree programs from the CSUs and UCs speaks to the uniqueness of the California Community College’s academic character – and the need to keep evolving while maintaining community colleges as a critical safety net that saves students and their families thousands of dollars a year. It would be a sound move for the Legislature to lift the pilot and the sunset status and to allow community colleges to continue to work with the community, local businesses, and employers to implement four-year degree programs that fit their communities.

As I mentioned above, this California Community College (CCC) Bachelor’s degree reflects the evolution of higher education.  Local community colleges are already leading the way with essential job training and career preparation that invests in our local workforce and economy.  State universities and the university system ought to follow the example of William Rainey Harper when he helped start Joliet Junior College to facilitate the further development and evolution of the University of Chicago.  Furthering the CCC development of bachelor’s degrees will strengthen all higher education in our state as we evolve our curricula to better meet the needs of our communities.  Peralta Colleges stand ready to embrace this academic enrichment to continue to increase educational opportunities for our students.