

Future of the Community College Baccalaureate

By Dale F. Campbell

Florida leaders have been key spokespersons both for and against authorizing community colleges to award the baccalaureate degree. Kenneth Walker, President of Edison Community College, Fort Myers, FL has been a strong advocate for encouraging the development of baccalaureate degrees conferred by community colleges and founded the Community College Baccalaureate Association. Dr. James Wattenbarger, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, at the University of Florida, and architect of the Florida Community College System, adamantly opposes this new trend, and believes that the baccalaureate is best provided by four year colleges and universities. In 2001, the Florida legislature approved the conversion of St. Petersburg Junior College to a baccalaureate degree granting institution and established a process allowing the State Board of Education to grant a limited number of baccalaureate degrees when there is a documented workforce and economic need. Currently Chipola College, Miami Dade College, Oakaloosa-Walton College, and St Petersburg College offer nineteen bachelor's degree programs. Two other institutions are applying for authority for four additional degree programs. Each of these programs is in selected critical workforce shortage fields such as teacher education and nursing.

Questions centered on how states should handle this divisive issue were prominent in almost every report presented at the National Council of State Directors of Community Colleges meeting at American Association of Community Colleges in Boston. Florida is considered a bellwether state, so can the Florida experience provide some guidance to

other state leaders, boards of trustees and policy makers? Rather than recount the pros and cons well documented in the literature, I am going to provide some insights from my work with Florida community colleges that have chosen to take this path and provide two recommendations for other state and community college leaders to consider that are facing this issue.

In the last six years Florida lawmakers have focused on increasing the number of Floridians who have a bachelor's degree. This is a key reason why the number of institutions authorized to award the baccalaureate has grown so quickly. However, Florida also has pressing educational needs in developmental and workforce education. Over 65% of first-time college students in the Fall of 2000-01 failed at least one entry test. The percentage of students passing all entry tests was 34.3%. Additionally, only one third of the occupations with the largest projected job growth until 2012 will require a bachelors or higher degree.

Since all Florida community colleges have been authorized to apply to the State Board of Education for authority to award the baccalaureate, I am concerned that over the next decade this effort will detract and diminish the community colleges' ability to fulfill the other critical aspects of their comprehensive mission in workforce development and remediation. The current regional accreditation requirements of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges also a powerful confounding influence.

SACS Commission on Colleges recommends community colleges that are granted authority to award the bachelors degree drop the term “community” from their name. This significant change in identity signals to faculty and the community that what is really valued is the collegiate aspect of the mission. Additionally, with this change in mission SACS requires all faculty to have 18 graduate semester hours in their discipline. Does this requirement really make any sense for those teaching developmental studies or workforce education? These external influences have the potential to ultimately lead to the degradation of the workforce preparation and remediation mission for colleges who gain authority to award the baccalaureate.

I believe that within the next decade Florida colleges granted the authority to award the bachelors degree will most likely consider their primary peer institutions to be member colleges of the Association of State College and Universities (ASCU), rather than the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). Ironically, some ASCU colleges were initially founded as junior colleges. Florida community colleges allowed award to award the applied bachelors degree (BAS) will eventually petition to award an applied masters degree (MAS) in the future. The justification will be to provide teaching faculty for community colleges to meet SACS requirements in critical shortage disciplines such as nursing and other allied health fields. An unintended outcome of this change will that it will increasingly weaken the American Association of Community Colleges battle to preserve the associate degree as an entry level degree to licensed nursing and other health occupations as more community colleges are authorized to award the baccalaureate.

What are some optional policies that state leaders and community college trustees and administrators should consider if they believe that this is not the best path to meet their state and communities needs? The first policy option to consider is to grant the authority to award the applied baccalaureate in applied workforce disciplines to only one institution with the statewide mission to partner with other community colleges. St Petersburg College is ideally positioned in Florida since it has met all the SACS Commission on Colleges requirements and has developed all of their applied BAS degrees so that the courses can be delivered on-line. Why consider authorizing multiple community colleges the authority to award the applied BAS degrees and risk diminishing the other aspects of the comprehensive community college mission?

The second policy option for states to consider is to include the for-profit sector as a potential partner and/or provider to meet the need for the applied BAS. Currently Florida statutes requires that public universities and private colleges and universities be provided the opportunity to meet the community's need for a bachelors degree before a community college can apply for the authority to do so. The dramatic rise of for-profit sector in the last decade is not taken into consideration. One of the substantive policy issues explored by the 2005 Invitational Policy Summit on "Recreating America's Community Colleges" was whether public community colleges should form strategic alliances/partnerships with for-profit colleges in order to meet state and national workforce and economic development needs. For-profit degree granting institutions like Corinthian Colleges, DeVry, Florida Metropolitan University, and ITT offer bachelors

and masters programs in many critical shortage areas community colleges are seeking to compete. State policy bodies should consider realigning state oversight as Texas has done to include all for-profit degree granting colleges with the rest of higher education in planning for each state's higher education and economic development needs.

Critics will say that if the for-profit sector is included, increased student costs and questions of transferability of credit must be addressed. However, I believe that community colleges would be better served to embrace the tiger and work through these issues in a spirit of cooperation so that all the educational needs of a state can be met with minimal duplication and conservation of scarce resources.

Florida's emerging model of converting community colleges to increase the level of baccalaureate attainment is not be an appropriate model for other states to consider replicating. Other options for policy makers to should consider would be to: 1) designate one college in each state with the statewide mission to award the applied BAS in partnership with the local community colleges, and/or 2) include the for-profit sector as potential partners in providing applied bachelors and masters degrees in specific workforce occupations. This is the bottom line: state boards and public community college boards of trustees must focus on how to best use limited state and local resources to meet the diverse needs of their states. No student should be forgotten.

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