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INSIDE HIGHER ED: THE KEY

EP 67: COMMUNITY COLLEGE BACHELOR'S DEGREES GAIN GROUND

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NOVEMBER 2021

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DECEMBER 13, 2021



## EP 67: COMMUNITY COLLEGE BACHELOR'S DEGREES GAIN GROUND

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DOUG LEDERMAN: The days when bachelor's degrees were the sole province of four-year public and private colleges are in the rear-view mirror. Hello and welcome to this week's episode of The Key, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and cofounder of Inside Higher Ed and I'm glad you're here.

In the last month, California enacted a law that could greatly expand the number of bachelor's degree programs being offered by the state's 116 community colleges. And Arizona passed a law allowing massive systems like the Maricopa Community Colleges to award their own four-year degrees. Half of all states now enable their community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees, but now many and in what fields remain a source of contention in many places. Advocates for the program say that they fill essential gaps left by four-year institutions in their states in providing educational opportunities to adults and other underrepresented students and meeting essential needs in healthcare and other industries. Efforts to create or expand community college bachelor's programs are often opposed by four-year colleges and universities concerned about the quality of the programs and, let's be honest, lower cost competition. There's a lot we don't know about these emerging programs.

And in this week's episode of The Key, coauthor of a report just published by New America, mapping the community college baccalaureate landscape. In our interview, she described what we already know and have yet to learn about these programs, how we might gauge their effectiveness, and what they tell us about why so many students struggle along the traditional path of transferring from two-year to four-year institutions.

Before we begin, a word from Formstack, sponsor of this week's episode.

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DOUG LEDERMAN: Now on to the discussion with Debra Bragg, a fellow at New America and a longtime researchers on community colleges at the University of Washington and the University of Illinois at Urbana Champagne. Debra, welcome to The Key and thanks for being here.

DEBRA BRAGG: Thank you. A pleasure...

DOUG LEDERMAN: As someone who has paid a lot of attention to community colleges for a long time, why is understanding the scope of these community college baccalaureate programs so important?

DEBRA BRAGG: I'm going to take you back a little bit. So when I was a graduate student studying higher education and learning a little bit about community colleges, I learned that there was something called terminal education. I couldn't believe it. I had to go check out as many books as I could find to try to figure out why on earth would we have created educational systems that we would even call terminal education. And then I found out that much of the work that I had done up until my doctoral program had really been part of terminal education. I was trained as a teacher and I was working on a PhD in the field of vocational education that we now call CTE. And so I wanted to understand as much as I could about how created systems of education that prepare people for work that we didn't think they would have the skills to go on and maybe someday get a degree, like a bachelor's degree. And I realized I was basically one of those people who had maybe somehow beat the odds.

And so my interest in some ways in this has come about because of my professional work, my research work over the years, which now extends to studying transfer education and all aspects of the community college. But I had a little soft spot in my heart for looking at a system in which we sort of brazenly accept that we create pathways for individuals, and particularly individuals who are underserved to, you know, no problem calling terminal. Those associative applied plans programs are widespread across this country, and the lack of transfer opportunities for those students is really troubling. So if we really care about creating a more equitable system, then I think this is one of the

most important and most egregious areas of higher education.

And I think the community college baccalaureate has provided and is providing an opportunity for a new vision, and testing of a system that can be more forgiving and a better way for many to be able to experience college.

So that's kind of where I come from. That doesn't mean that I don't have questions and that I don't continue to be really driven because of the that passionate side, there's also my research side that says we need the data, we need to understand this better. It's not a panacea. Where does it work and how could it become a more systemic reform of higher education that might lead us in a lot of different directions?

DOUG LEDERMAN: So are you saying that there are too many community college programs that aren't designed to lead to transfer? Do you see the community college baccalaureate programs as a means of replacing those certificate and associate degrees, or supplementing them?

DEBRA BRAGG: Well, I wouldn't eliminate the programs that exist that lead up to a bachelor's degree, but right now the students who are enrolled in Workforce and CTE programs that lead to certificates and associate degrees, many of those students have no place to go. So without the community colleges creating that upper division, students are trying to navigate through, if they choose to transfer, they're trying to navigate and patch something together that the system wasn't created to achieve. And so no wonder the rates of completion at the baccalaureate level for someone who lost most of their credits or never even got the right credits to transfer, that's a pretty difficult path to navigate. Many of the students who enroll in these programs are students of color, low-income, and first generation students. You look at the preponderance of the students, and we say, no, you're going to have to figure it out yourself if you want a bachelor's degree. That's pretty much what the system says. We didn't design this for you.

DOUG LEDERMAN: There is a ton of work going on on transfer. To what extent do you see the community college baccalaureate movement as a recognition that transfer isn't working and trying to create an alternative to it? Or is it meant to be just another path in addition?

DEBRA BRAGG: Well, I think it's another path, but I also think that we have to recognize that transfer doesn't work equally well for everyone. And I do think the work on the baccalaureate program does

shed some light on the areas and the ways in which transfer pathways are not working very well for working learners. The average age of students of research in these programs is 32, 32 years old. They're working full time. You know, these are not your typical transfer students and who transfer was really designed for.

DOUG LEDERMAN: As with any potential reform in higher education, we'll ultimately want to try to understand whether the programs are accomplishing what people expected them to, which is getting learners good-paying jobs and advancing their lives. But it seems like there's some more foundational work to be done first. Can you tell us what you published this week?

DEBRA BRAGG: Our work is the first to actually try to inventory all community college baccalaureate degree programs in the country. We've had an idea of the number of institutions, although I have never seen a list in the 14 years I've been studying this, I've never actually seen a list of the institutions. So we have developed that list of institutions. We now know what the degree programs are. We know the type of degree that's being awarded. And we have other information that we have gleaned through our research and IPEDS, and are assembling a dataset that will actually help us understand what this is. Once we know that, we can ask a whole lot harder questions about whether it's working and who it might be working for, and maybe who it might not be working for.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So what do we know now based on what you've already discovered?

DEBRA BRAGG: The programs primarily, as I've mentioned, are very focused on helping people find a good job. They're linked to local and regional economies. Some of the larger program areas are in business. A lot of those programs aren't sort of just your standard business curriculum. They are designed for individuals who are probably already working, and they're designed to help provide people with the kind of skills and knowledge that they need to advance in a career, and how to put that technical knowledge they may have developed in an earlier college program to work and integrate it into an area like management or organizational leadership, or entrepreneurial studies.

The area that's really grown to no one's surprise is healthcare. So we see across the whole spectrum of healthcare a number of different program areas. Now, some of these are driven by the fact that licensure is changing and you can no longer get a job as a respiratory therapist without a bachelor's degree. They are no longer allowing those programs that will be grandfathered in, but that is no longer possible. In some states, you can't become a dental hygienist unless you have a bachelor's degree. So these are programs that are rooted in the community college that are either going to go away, and it's

not clear who's going to offer them because they're not offered by a lot of four-year institutions. So the credentialing change is real. And it's not just in healthcare, but that's the predominate area.

But the other thing in healthcare is the need for nurses. And that is an area where I've read several areas just in the last week about the debate around the need for nurses, that associate degree nurses do often seek to advance. They're already a registered nurse and seek advancement, and the hospitals and the care facilities that employ them are seeking opportunities for advancement. And those employers see the community college as a very viable path. And we've seen just in the last year, we've seen a number of states pass new bills to expand community college baccalaureate programs--and nursing is one of the primary areas.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We've seen pushback against the creation of community college baccalaureate programs in some states, often from four-year colleges and universities worried about competition and overlap with programs they offer, sometimes questions about quality too. In so far half of the states that have authorized community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees, we've seen limits on the number of programs or disciplines they can be in. To what extent are there programs emerging in fields that the four-years haven't provided sufficient offerings in or are the community reaching learners who the universities weren't? It is one of those more than the other? Is it both of them?

DEBRA BRAGG: Let me just say I think that, you know, brokering the agreement to allow the community college baccalaureate to move forward in many states has been very conflicted. I think it's somewhat unfortunate when the agreement results in sort of hard and fast rules around what can be offered and what can't. Because we do that at one point in time and we can't predict that three years from now we're going to have a pandemic and we're going to have a crisis, a healthcare crisis, in which maybe those universities can't produce all the healthcare workers we need, but, by golly, we brokered an agreement by which those community colleges aren't going to do it. That makes no sense anymore.

And one of the things I think we've realized, there has to be an opportunity for students to progress and to achieve outcomes that put them in a better financial place. So that's a given. We want all higher education programs to have positive outcomes and more equitable outcomes. But we have to see that it's not always about replacement, it is sometimes about growing, growing the opportunities and outcomes for populations who haven't been served. That's been a hard message for, I think, universities to accept. The students who are being served by these programs are really a unique group of students to whom the door has been closed on higher education. And I don't think that they're going to go to the university unless we create these opportunities.

DOUG LEDERMAN: If your hypothesis holds, we'd see a pretty different group of students enroll in community college bachelor programs than we see in equivalent programs at four-year institutions. Do we have enough data yet to see if that's actually the case?

DEBRA BRAGG: Those students do tend to be a more diverse group of students. They do tend to be older students, and they do tend to be students who are Pell-eligible or Pell recipients. So the data do suggest that is a different group of students than the students who are attending the university.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And therefore it's expanding...

DEBRA BRAGG: Yes...

DOUG LEDERMAN:...the pool and the pie rather than encroaching or the other things that the four-year institutions might be defensively worried about.

DEBRA BRAGG: Yeah, but I have to say, I think that's an interesting argument from some of our university colleagues because demographic shifts, which are reducing traditional age populations, have tended to move higher education more toward adult working learners. So they're shifting who they're looking at as their population as well.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So they're encroaching on community colleges' terrain... [LAUGH]

DEBRA BRAGG: Well, you can look... But it's not a zero sum game. You know, we can look at the data on who's going to college and how many people still do not attend college who are very capable of attending. There is room for growth. There is room... And our economy would benefit from higher education looking at this in a more holistic way than we are. It's very troubling.

I would point out the two states that have scaled up this work more than anybody else in the country, Florida and Washington, have some of the most functional, productive transfer and community college baccalaureate programs in the country. It didn't all fall apart and, you know, we didn't... The sky didn't fall when Washington's and Florida's community colleges have just kind of over time, you know, begun



to find those opportunities for baccalaureate programs. And their students are still transferring and they both show that they're increasing the proportion of their population that are going to college.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I did notice the nice little graphic on the New American site that shows the states that have embraced community college baccalaureate programs. It is pretty disproportionately located in the West than the South. The picture may look a little different in the places where population is shrinking, etc. But your point is totally taken, and there is obviously way too much of a tendency in higher education for competition among institutions that is not necessarily productive. But that's probably a topic for another day maybe.

DEBRA BRAGG: It is. But, you know, having said that, I do want to say I do know that there isn't often enough money to go around, and we struggle. So I am not advocating that community college baccalaureate programs start for the sake of a community college having a baccalaureate. And if there is not a need and there is not the future opportunities for those graduates, they should not happen.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I'm curious what the next steps are. If we were seeing this expand, what are the information that we need going forward to assess whether these programs are working, effective, achieving the goals they were set out to achieve, and doing the ultimate work that you describe, which is expanding both access to and attainment of educational and training programs that lead to good jobs, yeah...

DEBRA BRAGG: I do think that there's a lot that we need to know. A lot of this is happening pretty organically. People get excited about the idea and are able to find ways to move it forward. But it's still a relatively small scale initiative. I mean, even if you look in states that have a number of institutions, there's usually one or two, that's the norm, one or two degree programs. They might graduate 10 to 20 people a year. So there's a lot of questions about scaling this up, and what would that really mean. I am convinced it would mean more access. And it would create better career pathways. But at what cost? And so I think that is a legitimate question to ask. What should one of these programs cost to develop, to implement? What should tuition and fees look like? I do think it's critically important that these degrees are more affordable. It would not be appropriate for this to be used as a revenue generator. You know, those are kind of legitimate questions I think that we all ought to be asking, if a community college takes on one of these programs, it doesn't displace something else, given the budgets are usually pretty thin for a community college. Those are really important questions.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What does what we've seen so far at the community college baccalaureate

landscape tell us about this much larger transfer, transfer mess I was about to say, that's probably not necessarily a good thing... But what does what's happening over here tell us about what we might do better in this much larger realm that has been the historical path that hasn't necessarily worked well. Are there lessons that you see that can be brought to bear on sort of fixing the transfer inadequacies in our ecosystem?

DEBRA BRAGG: When we look at the community college baccalaureate, how it's designed, and its intention, and its potential outcome, it helps us understand why transfer is not working. How can we be at a place, after all these years, where we still see unacceptable transfer rates and completion rates for students of color, for low-income, for first generation students? It's unacceptable to me that we tweak. It's a system that's built on such power and inequitable distribution of resources that it's hard for me to imagine how it will get better without some other models that say this is how you can do it. In some ways, a community college baccalaureate doesn't go far enough. But it's at least an experiment that says, maybe we got this wrong. Maybe this whole idea, you know, really didn't make a lot of sense, but yet we keep hanging on to it. And I find that, you know, problematic. I hope that all those working on transfer will continue to do it and they'll continue to do really great work, because pathways for students to attain credentials, including the baccalaureate, are just so critically important, not only to the students but to our country.

DOUG LEDERMAN: That was Debra Bragg, a fellow at New America, talking about community college bachelor's degrees, a larger landscape for student transfer, and even larger issues surrounding equitable access to higher quality postsecondary learning in the US. Thanks to her and to Formstack for helping to make today's program possible. Please come back in coming weeks for programs that explore the future of remote work and a new initiative showing that colleges actually can work together. And if you're enjoying this podcast, please subscribe to The Key on Apple or Google Podcasts, or your own very favorite podcast platform. That's all for today. I'm Doug Lederman, and until next week, stay well and stay safe.

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