



The Potential of California’s Community College Baccalaureate for Closing Racial Equity Gaps

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Executive Summary

The bachelor’s degree remains a fundamental path to economic opportunity in the United States. Critical for policymakers, then, is ensuring equitable access to such benefits—a task often constrained by long-standing structural barriers. One of the most obvious structural impediments for bachelor’s degree-aspirants in California (CA) is the current version of the CA Master Plan for Higher Education. With a robust public higher education system that is continually forced to adapt to demographic shifts and evolving labor markets, California is an especially important region for exploring the future of postsecondary education and economic growth. This report describes what we currently know about the California Community College Baccalaureate (CCB) program that was launched in 2017 and expanded in 2021. The program shows promising outcomes and that state education leaders can leverage existing components of the state’s education ecosystem to meet the economic and social demands of 40 million diverse Californians and to close existing racial equity gaps.

We examine existing data to show that over 1,000 students have enrolled in CCB pilot programs across California since such programs were approved in 2015. We found variation in who enrolled in the CCB programs by gender, race/ethnicity, and age group. For example, colleges like West Los Angeles College have enrolled a plurality of Latina/o/x students, which is no doubt

influenced by their local populations. In addition to analyzing enrollment patterns in CCB programs, we also describe program outcomes, including persistence and graduation in programs and employment success after graduation. Using administrative records from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), we found that across eight programs with available data, first-year persistence for CCB programs is generally high, with more than 80 percent of students continuing to the second term. Student institutional data from the first 15 CCB programs reveal that, on average, the year-two and year-three graduation rates for CCB programs (from when students can begin taking upper-division courses) were 67 percent and 78 percent, respectively in California across three student cohorts (Hoang, Vo, & Rios-Aguilar, 2022). Furthermore, CCB graduates have been relatively successful in gaining employment for each of the past three years with students reporting wage gains as a result of obtaining their baccalaureate degrees. Graduates of CCB programs also reported that their current job is in California, closely related to their coursework and field of study, and have positive wage gains. All told, employment outcomes for California CCB students are generally favorable and corroborate studies on the economic value of bachelor's degrees.

From carefully examining available data for California's CCB programs, as well as data from other states that have had successes in implementing CCBs, we argue that this is a pivotal moment to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and quality of CCBs in California and to, by extension, increase the number of students that complete a baccalaureate degree in the state. We urge legislators, administrators, practitioners, and other education leaders to consider addressing the following issues in the plans to expand CCB programs:

1. **Center racial equity.** Colleges interested in expanding and/or creating new CCBs need to develop strategies to attract more students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, as well as

students who can significantly benefit from participation in CCB programs, including student parents, first-generation college students, and adult learners. Legislation needs to also center racial equity while documenting and highlighting the economic value of CCB programs. As programs grow, regularly and systematically collecting and reporting data on post-graduation employment and earnings by race/ethnicity and additional student demographics will be key to assessing the impact of CCBs.

2. **Evaluate and improve implementation, quality, and accountability.** Effective program evaluation tools and resources are necessary for program growth. California must create a cohesive data and research infrastructure that is inclusive of CCB programs. This infrastructure should include data collection capabilities that support campuses with programs. As we document here, the existing data infrastructure consists of parallel data systems that can differ in how they count/report students and how they measure progress and outcomes. Improved data collection requires investment in human resources and research support to assess and evaluate CCB implementation and quality. At the state level, consistent evaluation efforts would provide programs with effective information required to continuously build and sustain CCB success for both students and institutions.
3. Invest in community colleges and CCB programs, especially those directly involved and impacted (e.g., the students and the faculty). The above efforts ought to be considered alongside changes to the Student-Centered Funding Formula (SCFF) that would reward community colleges for expanding opportunities and outcomes for students of color from economically disadvantaged backgrounds that earn baccalaureate degrees in the state. Changes to the SCFF can be a mechanism to incentivize and maintain accountability by rewarding colleges that close racial equity gaps, help students get jobs with livable wages, and

create pathways for students to go to graduate school. The state needs to elevate the work of faculty teaching in these programs and to compensate them adequately for the work they are doing inside and outside the classroom (e.g., curriculum design, mentoring).

4. Strategic expansion of CCBs. Community colleges might consider offering degrees in fields where there is a clear shortage of bachelor's degree-educated workers, even if these fields overlap with existing four-year programs (e.g., if local demand for registered nurses outpaces the production of bachelor's degrees in nursing at the nearest California State University). Evidence from states that allow program overlap between the community college and state university system (e.g., Florida) indicates little competition for students between sectors, as CCBs generally serve a different student population than the four-year sector. As such, there is a need to develop a more clear and consistent process to approve new CCB programs and document progress in existing ones to ensure alignment of program offerings and their communities. To develop a new program, this process could expand upon the existing process to document and examine:

- a) Labor market needs (in local and regional economies) with data from various sources (e.g., Lightcast, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Glassdoor, and the California Cradle-to-Career data system) and with considerations to labor market conditions by race
- b) Historical production of postsecondary credentials and racial equity gaps in college access, persistence, and completion in the region
- c) Lack of baccalaureate programs in a specific geographic proximity by race
- d) Disciplinary fields in which baccalaureate degrees are needed

- e) How the program will integrate with the regional academic (e.g., high schools, California State Universities, University of California system, etc.) and economic pipeline (e.g., employers)
5. **Market the educational and economic benefits of CCBs.** Community colleges should make explicit to students the opportunities that completing CCBs brings to their academic and career trajectories. High-quality CCBs programs should be highlighted to students and households for how it is an affordable and accessible pathway to a well-paying job. Colleges can also promote that students can further their education and apply to graduate school after obtaining a bachelor's degree via the CCB program.
 6. **Create a community of practice to learn together.** Colleges interested in growing their CCB programs and/or creating new CCBs need guidance on how and where to connect their programs so that there is better alignment with local and regional economies and labor markets. This process can be informed by data and research to contextualize and identify workforce needs with considerations for racial equity. Colleges can partner with related businesses and services on- and off-campus to sustain and grow these programs. Collaboration amongst multiple entities will help ensure the development of best practices, policies, structures, and systems that will be beneficial for colleges, businesses, and students.