



15 Calif. community colleges to offer bachelor degrees

By: Kyle Plantz October 8, 2014 3:02 pm



(Sacha Irick)

Corrections and clarifications: An earlier version of this report misattributed quotes and references to California State University student Quinn Western. They were provided by West Coast University second year Alyssa Banuelos.

Alyssa Banuelos, a nursing student at West Coast University in Orange County, Calif., knew she wanted to go into the medical field at a young age.

"It's just something that I felt like I needed to do," she says. "To help people and assist in healing, that's my calling."

She says she enrolled at West Coast University because they have a "decent nursing program." But when she learned of a proposal to allow some California community colleges to offer

baccalaureate (or as they're more commonly known, bachelor's) degrees, she thought, "Why didn't this happen sooner when I was looking at colleges?"

Paving the way for one of the largest community college systems in the United States to offer four-year degrees, on Sept. 28 California Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law a bill that will create a pilot program for 15 community colleges across the state to fill a growing workforce demand for college-educated, skilled workers in fields such as health, science and technology.

"This is one of the most ambitious goals undertaken in the history of California's community colleges," says California Community Colleges Chancellor Brice Harris. "This is a very exciting time for our students."

The law will allow some of the state's community colleges to offer bachelor degrees in fields not offered by the University of California and California State University systems, according to the bill.

The pilot program will begin no later than the 2017-18 academic year and run through at least the 2022-23 school year. Colleges will add on an extra \$84 per unit for baccalaureate coursework, which would allow students to earn a bachelor's degree for less than the average four-year school.

Banuelos says although she is receiving a "solid education" at West Coast, she wishes she could be a high school senior again to choose the cheaper option.

"Although I might not have received as good of an education at a community college in a health field, it certainly would be the cheaper choice and that would have been something I majorly considered," she says.

The four-year cost for tuition at a CSU school is about \$22,000.

Community college students in this program would have to meet the same general education requirements, complete a similar number of credits and the courses would be of similar rigor to four-year schools, according to the bill.

Community colleges in 21 states in America, such as Michigan, Colorado and Texas, currently offer bachelor's degrees in similar fields, including the sciences and applied or technical professions.

"Employers in California seek candidates with advanced credentials and many struggle to fill positions in some of the fields that will be covered under the new program," Harris says. "This law will help us to meet California's work force needs, does not duplicate CSU or UC degree programs and gives more Californians access to affordable higher education that can enable them to obtain well-paying jobs."

The program would add another level to the colleges' mission for its students, says the bill's author, state Sen. Marty Block.

"This is landmark legislation that is a game changer for California's higher education system and out workforce preparedness," he says. "SB850 [Senate Bill 850] boosts the focus of our

community colleges on job training now when California faces a major skills gap in our work force.”

A study conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California found that at the current pace of job openings and graduation rates, the state’s demand for college-educated workers would surpass its supply by 2025.

The institute’s projections show 35% of adults in California would have at least a bachelor’s degree in 2025, but 41% of jobs would require that level of education. California would need to graduate an additional 1 million baccalaureate recipients to meet employer demands.

Raúl Rodríguez, chancellor for the Rancho Santiago Community College District, which operates Santa Ana College and Santiago Canyon College in Orange County, says the new program should offer a more comprehensive range of baccalaureate degrees including nursing.

“California is coming to the conversation late,” he says. “It’s already being done around the country and for an education system that needs some help, this would be a great option for several students.”

Rodríguez says he hopes lawmakers expand the program after the 2022-23 academic year.

“It all depends on money and if the state can find a way to fund the system,” he says. “It becomes so political, but we need to be thinking in terms of meeting the needs of our students and the work force in California.”

The state chancellor’s office will judge college’s proposals and consult with UC and CSU to come up with the 15 community colleges to offer the degrees. The colleges accepted would be able to offer only one program, which has to pass through the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges. The California Community Colleges Board of Governors has until March 31 to approve the plan and figure out how to pay for the pilot program, with programs launching as soon as fall 2015, according to the bill.

Banuelos says she hopes students in high school highly consider this program as a viable option for higher education.

“Community colleges get a lot of bad flack here because so many people attend them and the California education system is in shambles,” she says. “But this really could be a great option for students from low-income households and I’m sure once the program starts, all the kinks would be worked out and rival that of any four-year school.”

Kyle Plantz is a junior at Boston University.

<http://college.usatoday.com/2014/10/08/15-calif-community-colleges-to-offer-bachelor-degrees/>