Focus Groups with Employers and Workforce Stakeholders for CCB
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Summary

The Illinois Community College Trustees Association (ICCTA) conducted several focus groups with employers and other stakeholders in the healthcare and manufacturing industry sectors. The purpose of these focus groups was to obtain the employer perspective on current workforce challenges and the potential role that the community college baccalaureate (CCB) could play in helping to address these challenges.

The focus group participants identified eight important workforce challenges, including:

- Workforce shortages and high vacancy rates across several healthcare occupations, especially nursing.
- Problems with recruitment and retention, especially in specialized fields.
- Inadequate opportunities for ADN nurses to attain their BSN degrees.
- Insufficient capacity in degree programs for other healthcare occupations, such as imaging and respiratory therapy.
- Recognition that challenges with shortages, vacancy rates and recruitment also apply to the manufacturing sector.
- Motivating employees to pursue higher education is a challenge, especially in locations where colleges and universities may be distant.
- Flexible work schedules and a better work-life balance are needed to enable employees to pursue further education.
- The cost of education remains a significant barrier for many employees.

The baccalaureate degree was seen as vital for various roles within the participants' organizations, particularly for professional advancement and leadership positions in healthcare, engineering, and technical fields.

The focus group participants were broadly supportive of the idea of community colleges offering bachelor's degrees. They saw this as something that could significantly impact workforce development by providing accessible education pathways for in-demand fields. They emphasized prioritizing programs in nursing, imaging, health administration, business/organizational leadership, and engineering technologies. Participants said they would encourage their employees to enroll in these programs and would hire graduates, provided the programs align with their needs.

> *Illinois Senate Bill 3787, introduced in 2024, would have authorized Illinois community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees in high-demand occupations, with approval of the ICCB and IBHE. The legislation was the subject of a legislative hearing and formed the basis for several constructive conversations with lawmakers. While it was not enacted, similar legislation is expected to be introduced in the 2025 session.*

Finally, focus group participants were very interested in being involved in the development of CCB programs in collaboration with their colleges. They had several suggestions for the roles that employers and workforce boards could play in helping to develop and implement such programs.

Introduction

Community college baccalaureate (CCB) programs have been gaining attention for their ability to provide affordable, accessible, and high-quality education that meets the evolving needs of our workforce. For the past two years, Illinois has been considering allowing its community colleges to confer the baccalaureate degree, as community colleges in 24 states already do. Individual colleges have participated in this effort, under the auspices of the ICCTA. One of the research projects undertaken in cooperation with the colleges was a survey of community college students to assess their interest in the CCB. Ten colleges worked with ICCTA on this survey project.

Along with the inclusion of the student voice in our CCB research efforts, ICCTA also recognized the importance of hearing from employers and other workforce stakeholders. We decided to conduct several focus group meetings with employers invited by the presidents of each of the ten colleges that had participated in the student survey project. Five focus group meetings were held. Each of these 90-minute focus groups was conducted virtually and was organized around two broad industry categories: healthcare, and manufacturing/information technology. These occupational areas were selected because they include occupations that we found to be critical high-demand sectors through our CCB supply/demand research.

While the specific participants in our focus groups are confidential, we can characterize them as follows:
- A director of transition to practice for nursing at a major hospital system.
- An education coordinator for respiratory care at a major metro area hospital.
- A regional director of respiratory care for a major hospital system.
- A nursing professional development specialist for a metro area hospital.
- A purchasing manager for a regional hospital in southern Illinois.
- A director of human resources for a manufacturer in western Illinois.
- A VP of human resources at a regional hospital.
- A workforce investment board director in the metro area.

Each focus group discussion was captured in automated transcription form. These transcripts were then edited for accuracy, and an initial draft of a summary for each question for each group was produced using Microsoft Pilot. This was edited for accuracy and completeness, and to preserve participant confidentiality. A final version for each question was prepared, combining the observations from each focus group meeting.

Results of the Focus Group Discussions

The focus groups were informally structured to promote a conversation about the idea of the CCB, and the needs of employers and the community in each region. We organized our conversation around four questions, and the results of our conversations are summarized below for each of these focus group questions.

Question 1. What are some of the most important workforce challenges facing your community and business/organization?

Overview. The participants offered their perspectives on several critical workforce challenges, particularly in the healthcare sector. The main challenges that they identified are discussed in this section, along with some suggested solutions.

1. Workforce shortages and vacancies in healthcare: There's a significant shortage of healthcare professionals, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many healthcare workers retired early, increasing the demand for new talent. High vacancy rates led to the expensive necessity of hiring contract staff from outside the region, which increases costs and can affect the continuity and quality of care. Reducing dependency on agency staff by building a stable, in-house workforce is a priority.

2. Recruitment and retention: Finding and keeping qualified employees remains a challenge, particularly in specialized fields like surgical technology and respiratory therapy. Many new hires, especially in nursing, leave within a short period despite support programs like nurse residencies and fellowship cafes. Developing in-house training programs and educational pathways may help address these shortages. This could entail a focus on strong partnerships with local community colleges to help build a pipeline of qualified candidates. Also, student rotations and on-the-job training might help attract and retain talent.

3. Increasing opportunities for ADN to BSN nursing programs: Efforts to encourage nurses to pursue bachelor's degrees faced setbacks during the pandemic. Now, there's a focus on strengthening educational programs, including at community colleges. The participants discussed the merits of online vs. in-person instruction for nursing students. Many nurses opt for online bachelor's degrees, but there was acknowledgement of the need for in-person and hybrid options as well to maximize opportunities for working professionals.

4. Expanding programs in other healthcare occupations: There's a need to expand educational programs beyond nursing to other areas like imaging and respiratory therapy. Community colleges are seen as vital in providing these opportunities. Potential changes in educational requirements for certain professions, such as respiratory therapy, could create significant challenges if new, higher qualifications are mandated.

5. Other industry needs: Similar workforce challenges are present in other industries, such as manufacturing, especially with new initiatives like the Clean Equitable Jobs Act.

6. Motivating employees to pursue further education: Encouraging employees to go back to school is challenging, especially in locations where commuting to educational institutions is not

feasible. Offering classes at the workplace and allowing employees to stay clocked in during these classes is one strategy to motivate them. Implementing mentorship and training programs could help employees develop the skills and qualifications needed for advancement.

7. <u>Flexible work schedules and work-life balance</u>: Many individuals, including youth and single parents, are balancing work and education. Nurses working 12-hour shifts find it challenging to pursue further education due to the demanding nature of their schedules. Employees today seek flexible work schedules and a better work-life balance, which has become a significant barrier. Adapting to these needs is crucial for retention and satisfaction. Programs that offer stackable credentials and pathways to bachelor's degrees are seen as beneficial for their career advancement. Providing flexibility in learning through online and hybrid programs would be advantageous, allowing employees to balance work, education, and personal commitments.

8. <u>Cost of education</u>: The cost of further education is a barrier for many employees. Many hospitals and other employers provide financial support, such as scholarships or tuition reimbursement. For example, some hospitals provide $5,000 or more per year in tuition reimbursement to help support employees' educational goals. Providing opportunities for employees to earn degrees through workplace programs or partnerships with local colleges can also help address the cost barrier.

Question 2. How important is the baccalaureate degree to your business/organization, and for which roles do you usually look for this degree in your candidates?

<u>Overview</u>. The baccalaureate degree was seen as vital for various roles within the participants' organizations, particularly for professional advancement and leadership positions in healthcare, engineering, and technical fields. These needs are summarized below.

In general, organizations prefer candidates with baccalaureate degrees for leadership roles. The degree serves as a foundational qualification for further education, such as a master's degree, which is often required for senior positions.

1. <u>Healthcare sector</u>:

    o   Nursing: There is a strong push for nurses to obtain their bachelor's degrees (BSN). Having a BSN is seen as a significant advantage and, in some cases, is required within a certain timeframe after employment. While Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN) nurses are valued for their hands-on skills, there is a strong emphasis on encouraging them to pursue a BSN. Having more nurses with a BSN degree is important for hospitals to achieve magnet status, which is a recognition of nursing excellence, and is often necessary for career advancement.

    o   Medical Lab Technologists: Positions like medical lab technologists typically require a baccalaureate degree, as opposed to medical lab technicians, who may only need an associate's degree.

    o   Radiology and Imaging: Roles in radiology, such as CT technologists, often require advanced education and training, highlighting the need for bachelor's degree programs in these fields.

- o Mental and Behavioral Health: Degrees in mental and behavioral health are crucial, with many roles requiring at least a bachelor's degree and often a master's degree.

- o Respiratory Therapy: Although currently not always required, there is discussion about the need for a bachelor's degree for certification in the future, which could impact hiring practices. This degree is critical for leadership roles and compliance with Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments for competency validation in blood gas testing.

- o Health Information Management: For roles in health information management, a bachelor's degree is often preferred.

2. <u>Engineering and Technical Roles</u>:

- o Engineers: Many engineering roles, especially mechanical engineering, require a baccalaureate degree. There is also a need for advanced technical skills in areas like robotics, which may benefit from higher education.

- o Engineering Technicians: While some technicians might start with associate's degrees, there is an emphasis on continuing education to obtain a bachelor's degree for these occupations.

3. <u>Business and administrative roles</u>: For business offices and administrative roles, having a bachelor's degree is often preferred. This is particularly true for roles like accountants, CPAs, and business managers. Positions such as clinical coordinators, education coordinators, and other coordinator-type titles typically require a bachelor's degree. This requirement underscores the importance of higher education for mid-level and leadership roles. While not always required for current roles, a bachelor's degree in healthcare administration or a related field is often necessary for advancement and is valued by employers in this domain.

4. <u>Veterinary Technicians</u>: Expanding programs like veterinary technology to include a baccalaureate degree would enhance career paths and sustainability in the industry.

Question 3. What is your opinion about the possibility of your local community college offering a bachelor's degree? For which occupations would you find this helpful, if any? If your community college implemented a baccalaureate degree, would you encourage your employees to enroll in this program?

<u>Overview</u>. Focus group participants were broadly supportive of the idea of community colleges offering bachelor's degrees. They saw this as something that could significantly impact workforce development by providing accessible education pathways for in-demand fields. They emphasized prioritizing programs in nursing, imaging, health administration, leadership, and engineering technologies. Participants said they would encourage their employees to enroll in these programs and would hire graduates, provided the programs align with their needs.

Potential sectors and occupations for CCB:

1. Healthcare sector:

   o Nursing (BSN): Encouraging ADN-prepared nurses to pursue a BSN is a top priority to meet magnet status requirements and enhance nursing skills. Community colleges offering BSN programs would be highly beneficial.

   o Imaging and Radiology: Expanding programs to include bachelor's degrees in imaging and radiology would help address the demand for highly skilled technologists.

   o Respiratory Therapy: Maintaining an associate degree entry level while offering a bachelor's degree option for further advancement would be ideal. This approach would address current shortages without creating additional barriers to entry.

2. Leadership and administrative roles:

   o Health Administration: A bachelor's degree in health administration would support the development of future leaders in healthcare and address the needs of administrative and leadership roles. Developing bachelor's programs in leadership or human resource specialization should also be considered.

   o Health Information Management: A bachelor's degree in this field would support the preparation of individuals for advanced roles in this occupation.

3. Broader industry needs**:**

   o Petrochemical and nuclear power: Expanding programs to offer bachelor's degrees in fields like petrochemical and nuclear power would benefit regions with significant industry presence. This would help retain local talent and support workforce development.

   o Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics (TDL): Although advanced degrees may not be necessary for entry-level roles, bachelor's programs in logistics and supply chain management could be valuable for managerial positions and help meet industry demands.

   o Engineering technologies: Manufacturing participants highlighted the importance of a bachelor's degree in engineering technologies for their business. This would be a top priority, as it would help update skills and support growth in manufacturing and engineering sectors.

   o Business and accounting: A bachelor's degree in business and accounting would also be helpful for roles requiring advanced knowledge and skills in financial management and business operations.

Potential Benefits of CCB: Participants identified several potential benefits of allowing community colleges to offer the baccalaureate degree in selected occupational areas. The main benefit of CCB is that it would provide more accessible and convenient education options for students, particularly those who may not be able to afford to attend a four-year university or relocate for their education. This would help keep students in their local communities.

Providing affordable and local options for bachelor's degrees would also reduce barriers to education, making it easier for employees to gain the qualifications needed for career advancement.

The CCB would also support diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts within the workforce. Community colleges already serve a significant number of underrepresented minorities, making them ideal institutions to expand bachelor's degree offerings and improve access to higher education for these populations.

Developing strong partnerships with local community colleges would create clear pathways for students from associate to bachelor's programs, fostering a seamless transition and reducing barriers to higher education.

Employers in the focus groups said that they would encourage their employees to enroll in these local programs, as it would allow them to pursue further education without needing to leave their jobs or relocate. This approach is consistent with their current efforts to support professional development and career advancement within their organizations.

Question 4. Would you like to be involved in the development of such a program at your community college? In what way would you prefer this engagement to take place?

Overview. Focus group participants were very interested in being involved in the development of CCB programs in collaboration with their colleges. They had several suggestions for the roles that employers and workforce boards could play in helping to develop and implement such programs.

1. Advisory roles in curriculum development:

    o   Curriculum development: Participants emphasized the importance of being involved in an advisory capacity for the development of these programs. Providing input on the skills and qualifications needed for various programs is essential to ensure the curriculum aligns with industry demands.

    o   Workforce board involvement: Workforce boards can play a significant role by functioning as a convener to ensure employers are at the table, providing feedback, and engaging in the development process.

    o   Existing relationships: Employers should build on existing relationships with community colleges, which will help in seamlessly integrating bachelor's components into the current programs.

2. Providing clinical rotations and internship opportunities:

    o   Offering clinical sites: Hospital participants expressed willingness to offer clinical rotation sites and support students in gaining practical experience. This involvement would be crucial for healthcare programs, especially for BSN completion.

    o   Expanding internship programs: Employers can provide internship opportunities to students, helping them gain hands-on experience and better prepare them for the workforce.

3. Faculty and instructional roles:

   o Employers as faculty: Participants suggested that some employers could take on faculty roles, leveraging their expertise to enhance the quality of education. This approach would provide practical insights and real-world experience for students.

   o Guest lecturers and workshops: Engaging professionals as guest lecturers or workshop leaders can enrich the curriculum and provide students with diverse perspectives.

4. Motivating and supporting employees:

   o Encouraging participation: Participants highlighted the importance of integrating educational programs into employees' work lives to motivate participation. This approach would make it easier for employees to pursue further education and develop their skills.

   o Providing support and resources: As mentioned above, offering support and resources, such as tuition assistance and flexible learning options, would encourage employees to take advantage of these programs.

5. Hybrid Engagement:

   o In-person and virtual participation: A combination of in-person and virtual meetings can facilitate effective collaboration and ensure that stakeholders can participate regardless of location.

Recommendations for Future Research

Additional engagement with employers and other stakeholders is needed to expand the knowledge base for development of the CCB, and to validate the results presented here, especially the employer priorities for CCB program development.

Hospitals and healthcare professionals were heavily represented in these focus groups, so necessarily these results reflect the perspective of this industry sector. Additional engagement is needed with manufacturers and information technology sector representatives, as well as educators, to broaden the sectors for which we can offer an employer perspective.

ICCB or other state-level stakeholders may wish to continue this research as CCB policy is developed in the coming year. A recent survey of colleges regarding priorities for CCB development would be an excellent starting point for this engagement with employers at the college level, as would the results of our recently completed survey of community college students about CCB.

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We are especially appreciative of the employer representatives and workforce stakeholders who participated in our focus groups. We hope that this focus group report will provide useful insights for state decision-makers, college administrators and other stakeholders.

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