

Twenty Frequently Asked Questions about Community College Baccalaureate Degrees in Illinois

Interest in community college bachelor's degrees is growing in Illinois, but the state has not passed legislation authorizing community colleges to confer these degrees. Over the last two years, the Illinois Community College Trustees Association (ICCTA) has gathered insights from many constituents about the potential need for these degrees. An exploration of policy options will be continuing in the coming year. This FAQ presents 20 questions that have arisen in the ICCTA's research so far, followed by evidence-based responses:

1. How many states confer CCB degrees?
2. Are CCB degrees growing in the United States?
3. How many CCB degree programs are offered, and what programs are the most common?
4. Why do community colleges offer associates but not bachelor's degrees?
5. What factors contribute to state laws authorizing CCB degrees?
6. How much does geography affect whether students go to college?
7. How much do CCB degrees cost students?
8. Do CCB degrees harm universities?
9. Who enrolls in CCB degree programs?
10. Do CCB students graduate?
11. Do CCB graduates get good jobs?
12. How do CCB and university baccalaureate graduates compare?
13. Do CCB degrees prepare graduates for graduate education?
14. Can CCB degrees increase access and close equity gaps in baccalaureate attainment?
15. Do CCB degrees align with Illinois' commitment to career pathways?
16. What do high-quality CCB degree programs look like?
17. What role do employers play in CCB program approval?
18. How are new CCB programs approved?
19. How much time does it take to stand up a new CCB program?
20. What could Illinois learn from states that confer CCB degrees?

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1 How many states confer CCB degrees?

Twenty-four states authorize bachelor's degrees conferred by community colleges using the Carnegie classification of [baccalaureate/associates](#). Carnegie applies this classification to institutions having at least one baccalaureate degree program, with more than 50 percent of total degrees at the associates level. Baccalaureate/associates institutions designated as "mixed" confer more than 10 percent of their total degrees at the baccalaureate level whereas "associates dominant" colleges confer less than 10 percent of their total degrees at the bachelor's level. Figure 1 shows the nation's 24 states with at least one baccalaureate/associates college with either the mixed or associates dominant designation.

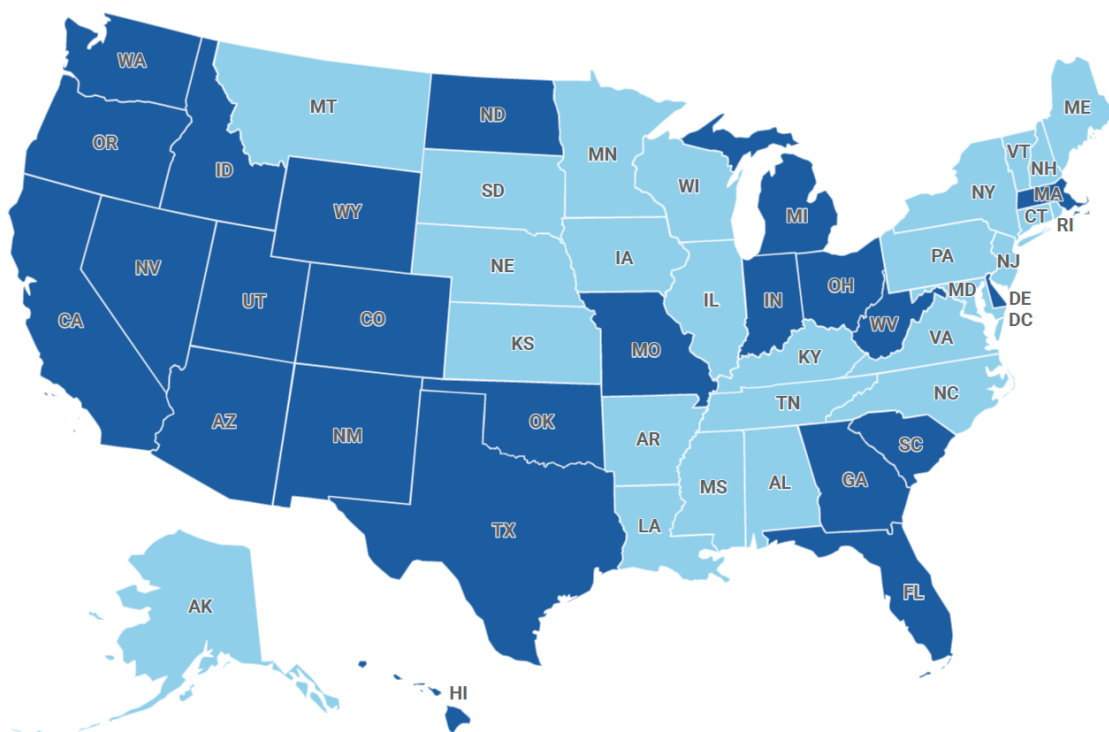


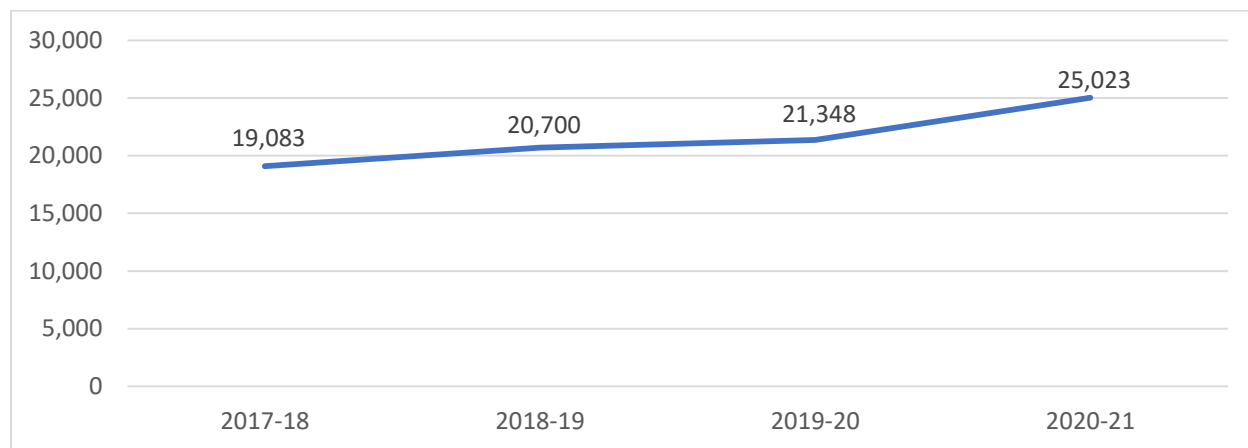
Figure 1. Current Map of the United States showing 24 CCB-Conferring States in Dark Blue

2 Are community college bachelor's degrees growing in the United States?

Institutions classified by Carnegie as "associates" colleges because their highest degree was the associates that later adopt bachelor's degrees are called community college baccalaureate (CCB) institutions, and the bachelor's degree conferred by these colleges are referred to as CCB degrees.ⁱ Community colleges in 14 states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Oregon, Nevada, South Carolina, Texas, Washington, and Wyoming) passed state laws and/or administrative rules allowing all public community and technical colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees. Six states (Arizona, Idaho, Missouri, Ohio, Oregon, and Wyoming) adopted new laws authorizing CCB degrees in the last five years, and three more states already conferring CCB degrees (California, Florida, and Washington) expanded their programs of study and/or types of bachelor's degrees to include bachelor of science (BS) and bachelor of science in nursing (BSN).^{ii, iii}

Figure 2 shows the steady growth of bachelor's graduates in community colleges in the last four years [*American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Fast Facts*]. Looking nationwide, AACC estimates 159 public community colleges and 37 independent two-year colleges. These institutions make up nearly 20% of all community colleges in the country and collectively account for about 25,000 bachelor's conferrals in the most recent academic year graduate data are reported to the federal Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), in 2020-21.¹ This count from AACC includes 11 of 35 [tribal colleges and universities](#) whose primary mission is deliver high-quality college education that includes preserving and restoring Native languages and cultural traditions.

Figure 2. Growth in CCB Degree Graduates



3 How many CCB degree programs are offered, and what programs are most common?

As the number of community colleges conferring bachelor's degrees increases, the types of degrees and programs (or fields) of study grow as well. A 2021 [national inventory](#) of CCB programs conducted by the Community College Baccalaureate Association (CCBA) found about 560 CCB degree programs across the United States, with about half of these programs conferring bachelor of applied science (BAS) degrees, and another one-third conferring bachelor of science (BS) degrees. The remaining degrees are bachelor of science in nursing (BSN).^{iv}

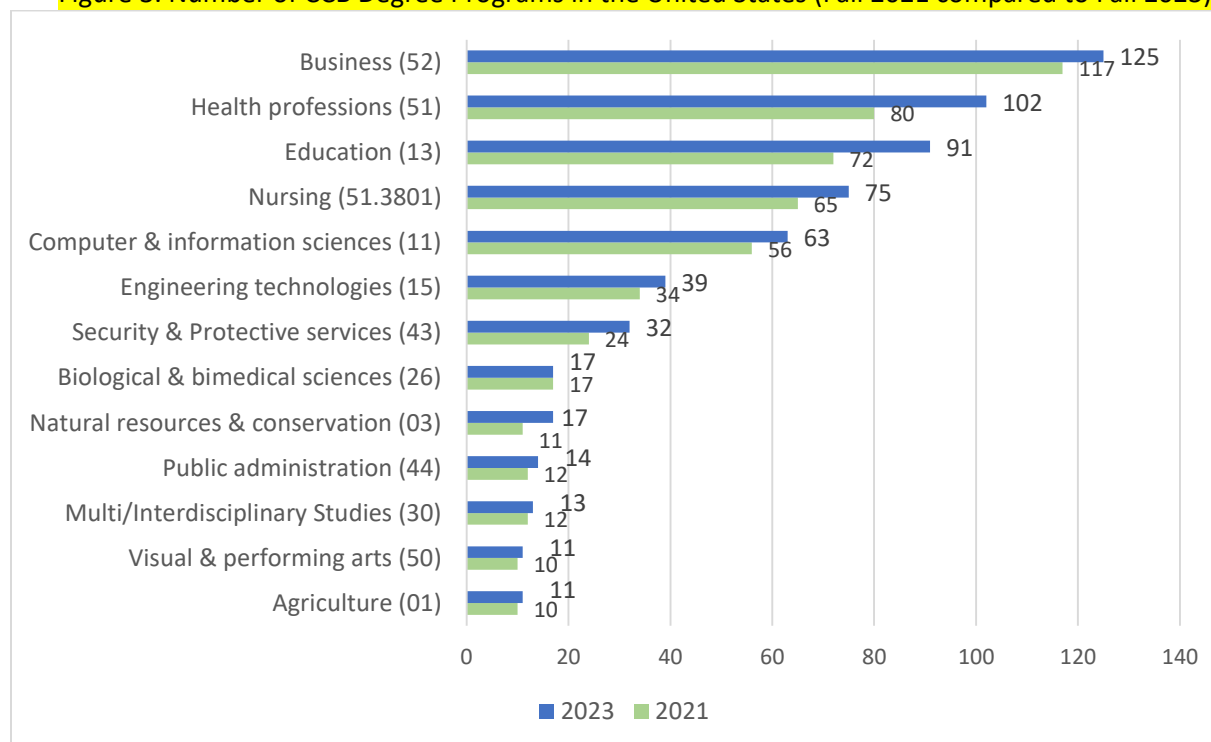
Based on the most recent data in this national inventory, CCBA estimates there are approximately 660 bachelor's degree programs conferred in the 24 states, with the largest number of programs in states with the longest history conferring these degrees (i.e., Florida, Georgia, Nevada, Texas, and Washington). From November 2021 to the present when the CCBA is actively conducting another national inventory, the nation's total number of CCB programs has increased by at least 100 programs, and this number may grow even higher by the time the CCBA publishes new national results in January 2024.²

¹ The AACC *Fast Facts* series is published annually and based on analysis of numerous federal datasets including the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). More of AACC's research on community colleges in the United States can be found [here](#).

² CCBA's national inventory is the only dedicated repository of information on CCB degree programs in the United States. Bachelor's graduates of community colleges are reported to IPEDS; however, IPEDS does not include CCB enrollments. As a result, CCB students/graduates are seen in IPEDS two, three, or more years after CCB programs are approved and implemented, obscuring a complete and accurate picture of CCB enrollment.

Drawing current national inventory data from CCBA, Figure 3 shows fields of study with 10 or more CCB programs, with business being the most common field of study in 2021 and currently. Healthcare programs are also prevalent and increasing in number, possibly reflecting the impact of COVID-19. When healthcare and nursing programs are combined, these health-related programs outnumber business. Dental hygiene and respiratory care are two of the fastest growing CCB degree programs, which is attributed to a shifting preference for bachelor's and sometimes higher degrees.³

Figure 3. Number of CCB Degree Programs in the United States (Fall 2021 compared to Fall 2023)



CCB degree programs are also increasing in early childhood education (ECE) and other teacher preparation programs that are experiencing [teacher shortages](#). Advocating for CCB degrees in ECE, Rockhold and Andrews recently wrote, “the United States has a pipeline waiting to assist in overcoming this education tsunami. It is the nearly 1,200 community and technical colleges strategically located in all areas of the country” (p. 33).^v

CCB degree programs are also expanding in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), including in information technology, cybersecurity, biomanufacturing, engineering technologies, and other such fields. Added to these, CCB degree programs are growing in security and protective services and natural resources and conservation, possibly reflecting concerns with crime and climate change.

4 Why do community colleges offer associates but not bachelor's degrees?

When junior colleges were created at the turn of the 20th century, advocates envisioned a new form of higher education that would give a growing number of high school graduates an opportunity to attend college. At this time when few students finished high school, the idea of expanding access to college was

³ Exemplifying this point, a discussion of shifting credential requirements in respiratory care can be found [here](#).

revolutionary. Liberal arts and vocational education were envisioned from the start, with transfer to a university considered an option for a select few students thought capable of mastering bachelor's level studies. "Terminal vocational education" was the preferred option for many if not most students. Chief among these pioneering colleges was Joliet Junior College, which is widely recognized as the first and longest running junior college in the United States.⁴

World War II (WWII) played a major role in expanding junior colleges, increasing the number of colleges offering vocational training to support the war and after the war, providing educational opportunities for veterans to return to civilian life. In what some scholars consider the most important policy statement on U.S. higher education, the Truman Commission endorsed junior colleges and introduced the term "community colleges" to reflect their local orientation and potential role in expanding college enrollment. Calling on these colleges to serve communities within regional districts of states, the Commission recommended community colleges provide broad access to student populations historically excluded from postsecondary attendance because of race, gender, age, income, religion, and other defining characteristics. In what has become a prophetic statement, the Commission authors anticipated bachelor's degrees would need to be conferred by community colleges. To this point, the Commission authors wrote, "some community colleges may offer a full 4 years of college work", recognizing associates degrees may not fully address the needs of local communities and their constituents [*The President's Commission on Higher Education*, 1947, p. 67 (as quoted in Wright-Kim (2021))].^{vi}

In the mid-1960s policies advocated by the Truman Commission were passed into federal and state laws to form today's higher education infrastructure. Like most states, legislation in Illinois codified community colleges as the primary provider of postsecondary credentials up to the associates degree, with universities conferring bachelor's and graduate degrees. This pattern of credentialing has dominated higher education in Illinois since the 1960s, although curriculum and credentials have changed considerably over time as all types of college credentials have proliferated in ways.^{vii} The proliferation of CCB degrees can be seen as a part of this progression.

5 What factors contribute to state laws authorizing CCB degrees?

Many factors contribute to state adoption of CCB degrees, including a demonstrated need to close workforce gaps, expand college opportunities for underserved students, create pathways for students for whom transfer is unattainable, and reduce college costs for students. Some states have found legislators, policy makers, employers, and college administrators, faculty, staff, students, and graduates build a coalition to support CCB degrees. Using data, these states show how CCB degrees can prepare students for good jobs in communities where students would be unlikely to pursue a baccalaureate without a CCB option.^{viii}

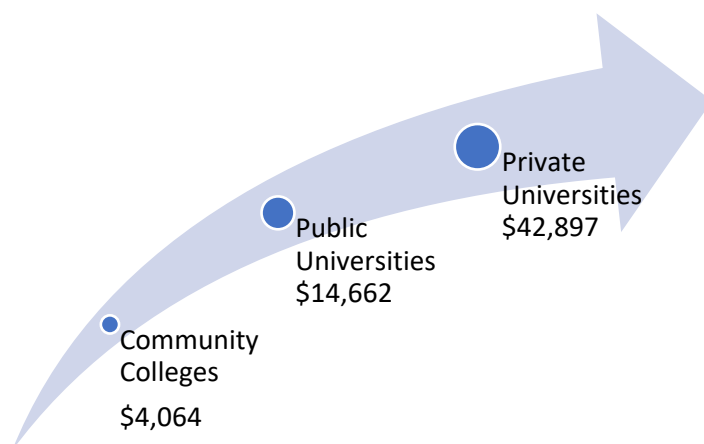
Another important factor contributing to state adoption of the CCB is the recognition of the potential for these degrees to provide baccalaureates for students completing terminal associate of applied science (AAS) degrees. Typically falling outside state transfer and articulation policy, such as the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI), graduates of AAS programs have limited or sometimes no formal transfer pathway to universities. To be clear, some occupationally focused programs do provide program-specific agreements between institutions that promote transfer and when these agreements are working, they should be honored and continue to be advanced. However, when transfer is not a viable option for AAS

⁴ It should be noted that Illinois is widely recognized as having the first junior college in the United States at Joliet Junior College formed in 1901, and the college's [website](#) proudly details the institution's history.

students, inequities in access to baccalaureate attainment can develop.⁵ To this point, the *Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) Data and Characteristics report* shows stronger graduation rates for racially minoritized students enrolled in AAS degree programs than transfer programs. Whereas these results are promising for racially minoritized graduates pursuing employment, it is unclear how these students, as well as other AAS students, fair when they transfer.

The rising cost of college is another factor in state adoption of CCB degrees since these degrees are typically offered at a [lower cost](#) than university bachelor's degrees. Figure 4 replicates a chart published by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) showing a substantial difference in average tuition and fees for first-year students in community colleges, public universities, and private universities in Illinois. The annual tuition and fees of public universities are more than three times higher than the average tuition and fees for community colleges, and the average tuition and fees of private universities are far higher than either community colleges or public universities. Higher tuition and fees have a [dampening effect](#) on student access and participation and deepening inequality.

Figure 4. Comparison of Average Tuition and Fees by Higher Education Sector in Illinois⁶



Adding other costs to college attendance, some potential students find commuting or living away from home to be [cost prohibitive](#). To this point, the *Education Data Initiative* estimates students pay an average of about \$11,000 per year for room and board at public universities in the United States. These expenses added to with tuition and fees represents a more realistic cost attendance, or what some researchers call [net price](#). Paying this net price can be even especially challenging for students who need to forego working to attend college, estimated at about \$44,000 median income per year.^{ix} Added together, these expenses can weigh heavily on student decisions about whether to pursue a bachelor's degree, particularly on students who have limited financial resources.

⁵ Understanding community college AAS-degree students is important to any legislative on bachelor's attainment in Illinois. Anticipating this need, we conducted supply and demand analysis in three program areas that culminate in AAS degrees in Illinois: information security analyst/cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, and respiratory care, and these results are available on the ICCTA website.⁵

⁶ This chart is replicated from the *Illinois Community College Board Frequently Asked Questions* document online [here](#).

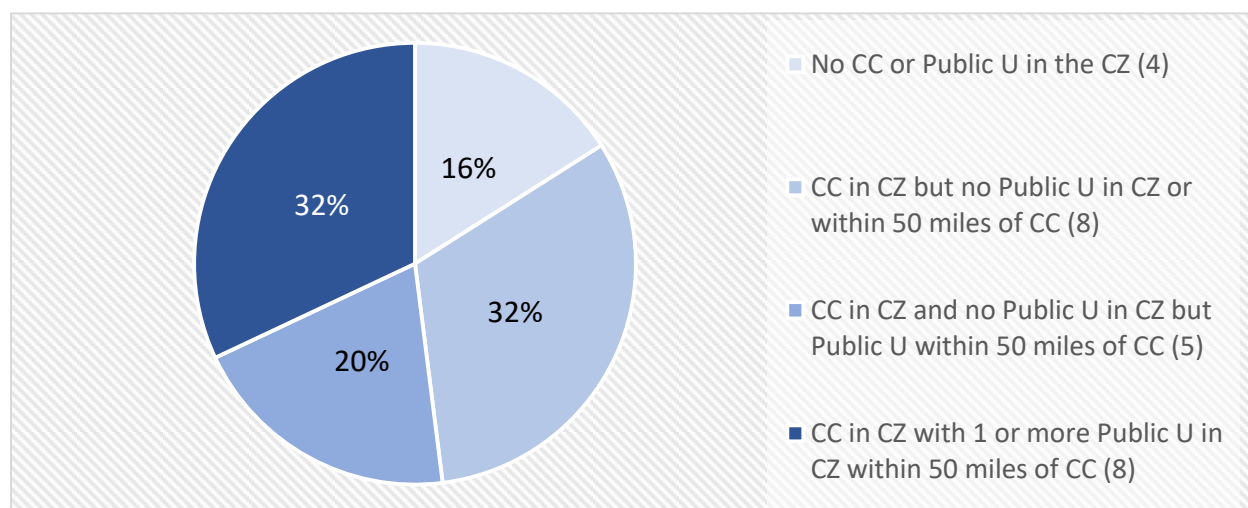
6 How much does geography affect whether students go to college?

The place students live has a strong pull on whether they ever go college, with students living farther away from any college option being at higher risk of not attending a college or university.^x Residing in an “education desert” is a very good predictor of whether a student will ever get college degree. Except for students whose families can afford to pay for college attendance anywhere their child wishes to go, most students attend college within a 50-mile radius of home. Distance is an especially important factor for adult learners who seek to attend college, adding [mental and physical stress](#) to their already busy professional and personal lives.

Also, college students can experience what researcher Elizabeth Meza calls an “[opportunity mirage](#)” where distance but also other factors besides proximity to college can get in the way of college attendance.^{xi} For example, students who worry about cost or getting into selective admission programs may decide college is unrealistic and never attempt to go to college despite one or more institutions being with relatively close proximity. Opportunity mirages may explain why community college students who say they want transfer to get a bachelor’s degree never do so. Researcher [John Fink](#) with the Community College Research Center who has studied transfer extensively as projected only about one-third of students who want to transfer actually do so, leaving literally thousands of U.S. students without the upper division coursework they need to attain a baccalaureate.

Replicating research on education deserts conducted by Nicholas Hillman (2016)^{xii}, our team studied Illinois’ 25 [commuting zones](#) (CZs) and distances between community colleges and public universities in the state. Figure 5 shows 4 CZs have no community college or public university, and another 13 CZs have a community college but no public university. This means 17 CZs (68 percent) of Illinois’ CZs are without a public university, but 5 of these CZs do have a public university within 50 miles of a community college. This distance is slightly greater than the average of 42 miles from a community college to a public university, and while this distance doesn’t seem large, [Hillman](#) submits distances of this nature can affect student college-going decisions, particularly students with limited socioeconomic resources.^{xiii} This analysis confirms education deserts exist in Illinois and points to the need to consider how student access to public higher education, particularly public universities, may play a role in college enrollment by different student populations.

Figure 5. Number of Community Colleges and Public Universities in Illinois’ 25 Commuting Zones



7 How much do CCB degrees cost students?

Keeping the cost of college modest enough to enable students with limited socioeconomic resources to attend is an important goal of many CCB programs. Most states with CCB degree programs intentionally set tuition and fees for CCB degree programs at levels comparable to the tuition costs of other programs in the community college. There are three predominant tuition rate policies for CCB degree programs. First, community colleges set upper division tuition rate at the same or very similar to lower division tuition, thereby keeping the tuition rate consistent in the last two years with the first two years of community college. This approach is used by states like Florida, Ohio, Oregon, and Wyoming.

A second approach to tuition rate policy is for states to specify that the upper division tuition rate can rise up to 150 percent of the tuition at the lower division level. California put this policy in state statute in 2014, and this policy remains law through [new legislation](#) expanding CCB programming in the state. Following California's lead, Arizona passed [Senate Bill 1453](#) authorizing bachelor's degrees conferred by community colleges in 2021.^{xiv} Modeled after California's CCB bill Arizona set upper division tuition rates at up to 150 percent of lower division tuition rate of community colleges. Since passage of this bill, the Maricopa Community College District located in Phoenix has moved quickly to launch 11 CCB degree programs starting in fall 2023.

A third approach is used in Washington where the upper division tuition rate is set at a similar level as the state's regional public universities, with the idea being students securing the upper division bachelor's instruction should pay a similar rate regardless of whether they attend a regional public university or community college. This policy was adopted when the first CCB legislation was passed in Washington about 15 years ago when tuition rates were lower across the board. Washington is also a state with community college tuition policy that allows students to move between community colleges without paying in and out of district tuition, giving students a great deal of flexibility of college attendance. Therefore, while the tuition policy reflects a higher level of tuition and fees for CCB degree programs in Washington than in other states, the high level of competition among community colleges may help keep tuition rates competitive at both the associates and bachelor's levels.^{xv}

8 Do CCB degrees harm universities?

An important way to assess whether CCB degrees harm universities is to ask how these degrees influence university enrollment and transfer. While the research examining this issue is modest to date, some studies have examined this question and found little or no negative impact on universities. Looking at the effect of CCB degree programs on universities in Florida, an early-adopter state of CCB degrees, University of Florida researchers found no negative effect on public university enrollment as a result of community colleges conferring bachelor's degrees. In fact, rather than detracting from public university enrollment, the researchers reported CCB programs had a positive relationship to public university bachelor's degree production. Speculating on the reason for this finding, the researchers suggest CCB degrees may create stronger incentives for students to complete associates degrees and therefore increase the pool of associates-degree graduates who transfer in addition to more associates-degree graduates matriculating to a bachelor's degree program offered by a community college.^{xvi} The study also found CCB degree programs may divert associates-degree graduates from transferring to private for-profit institutions when community college students pursue bachelor's degrees at their own institution.

Also studying college enrollment, Wright-Kim reported modest increases **in community college enrollment** when community colleges within a state offer baccalaureate degrees.^{xvii} The difference in enrollment pre- to post-CCB degree adoption tends to be fairly small, but large enough to produce statistically significant results. This study implies CCB degree programs may boost overall community college enrollment, which in turn, helps to grow the number of students who are eligible to pursue more collegiate programming, including transfer as well as CCB degrees.

It is also important to remember, the impact of CCB degree programs on universities is minimized because the preponderance of CCB degree programs enroll AAS students whose programs fall outside state transfer and articulation agreements, like the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI). Consequently, many AAS students do not have a pathway to the bachelor's degree without community college conferral of bachelor's degrees. Unfortunately, when AAS students attempt to transfer, they are prone to experiencing credit loss and increased time and cost in securing their baccalaureate degree.^{xviii}

9 Who enrolls in CCB degree programs?

Research conducted on CCB students in Washington and Florida⁷ shows students' average age is older than typical undergraduate students, averaging 31 or 32 years old depending on the state conferring the CCB degree. These students are also more racially and ethnically diverse than students in similar fields of study, and many CCB students come from families with limited financial resources to pay for college. As a result, many CCB students work full-time to support themselves and their dependents while pursuing a baccalaureate degree.^{xix} To support these students, community colleges tend to offer flexible curriculum and instructional options, and they supplement academics with proactive student supports. Financial assistance, including Pell grants and other state and institutional aid and scholarships, is made available to CCB students, when institutional capacity allows community colleges to do so. Recognizing the cost of tuition and living expenses can impede college attendance, New America [reports](#) CCB degrees are typically offered at prices considerably lower than public and private universities.

Research also shows many CCB students continue their studies at the same community college as where they pursued their associates degree, reinforcing the importance of bachelor's degree programs within specific regions of the state with little or no access to public universities.^{xx} When interviewed about their experiences in CCB programs, students and graduates talk about feeling comfortable navigating their bachelor's level education at the community college where they got their associates degree. They share stories of positive personal relationships with faculty, staff, and other students that bolstered their confidence to attain a bachelor's degree. It is also clear students' stories that prior success at the associates bolstered their resolve for learning at the upper division level where they could prepare for careers requiring bachelor's degrees.

10 Do CCB students graduate?

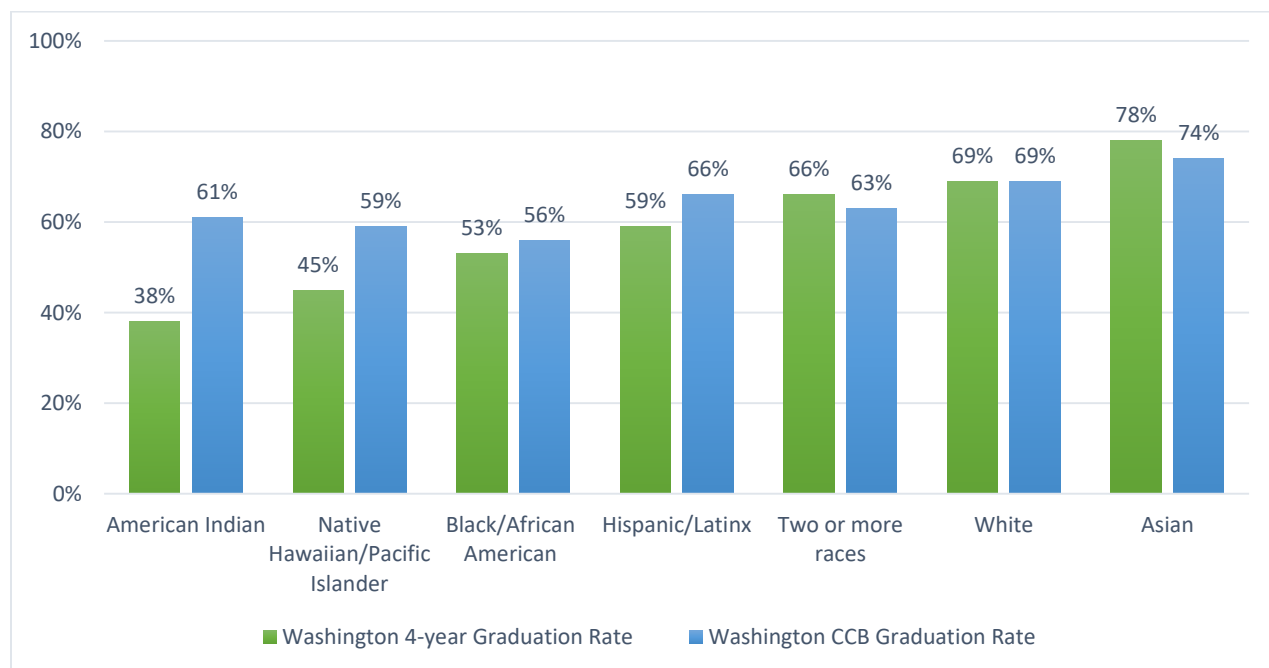
A modest number of studies have been conducted and reported promising results on CCB student graduation rates. The CCB graduation rate of 68 percent in Washington where nearly all community and technical colleges confer at least one CCB degree rival the university bachelor's completion rate for community college transfer students at 70 percent.^{xxi} These completion rates are consistent with

⁷ The extant research on CCB programs in the United States relies heavily on a small number of states that has published results and made data available to researchers. Thus, CCB degree programs and student outcomes in Florida and Washington, and to a lesser extent California, are discussed most extensively in the literature and cited most extensively in this FAQ.

Washington’s postsecondary attainment goal of 70 percent, which is 10 percent higher than Illinois postsecondary credential or degree attainment rate of 60 percent. However, the Washington study did find differences in graduation rate by race for CCB degree programs. Specifically, Asian, White, Hispanic/Latinx, American Indian or Alaska Native, and multi-race CCB students graduated at higher rates than Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander and Black/African American students. Gaps in completion rates are prevalent in Illinois too, with the state’s strategic plan, *A Thriving Illinois*, highlighting concerning [inequities](#) in college completion. Research conducted by the *Partnership for College Completion* report estimates inequity gaps in college degree attainment across all sectors of higher education in Illinois to be “10 to 20 percentage points and sometimes as high as 30 to 35 percentage points among students when disaggregating by race, household wealth or income”.

Again, drawing on data from Washington, Figure 6 below shows bachelor’s graduation rates for community colleges conferring CCB degrees compared to university bachelor’s programs. These results reveal inequities between student groups by race, but they also show higher graduation rates for Black/African American, Hispanic/Latinx, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native CCB graduates than for the university bachelor’s group. In this state, the graduation rates for students identifying as White, Asian, and two or more races are slightly lower for the CCB group than the university bachelor’s group, although these rates are still near or beyond the state’s goal of 70 percent.

Figure 6. CCB and 4-year Graduation Rates for Racial and Ethnic Groups in Washington State



Note: Sources for this figure are the *Community College Baccalaureate Degree Completion* and *Washington. Washington Equity Report Snapshot*^{xxii}

11 Do CCB students get good jobs?

Preliminary graduation rates for students enrolled in California CCB degree programs follow a similar pattern to the Washington graduation data, though California results are slightly lower possibly due to less mature CCB programming in this state than Washington. The California CCB graduation rates ranged

from 43 percent for American Indian/Alaska Native and 50 percent for Black/African American to 79 percent for Asian and 80 percent for Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.^{xxiii} Again highlighting inequities in these graduation outcomes, the researchers urged community colleges to close these equity gaps while pointing out California CCB programs may see better outcomes in the future. Preliminary data collected by the researchers showed “a lot higher” graduation rates for students three years after initial enrollment in a CCB program. In all cases, results on completion are important to track as more students enroll in CCB degrees in these and other across the country.

A review of the literature on the relationship between CCB degrees and graduates’ outcomes is found [here](#), but briefly, this study of Washington students shows positive wage gains for graduates in fields like business and nursing. Indeed, several studies on employment and wages in Washington have shown high employment rates for CCB graduates compared to university bachelor’s graduates in these fields. In fact, within the first-year post-graduation, CCB graduates had higher median annual earnings than university graduates in similar programs of study.^{xxiv} Both CCB and university bachelor’s graduates showed considerable growth in median annual earnings by three years post-graduation, with CCB healthcare graduates receiving similar or slightly higher median annual earnings than university graduates. In business, median annual earnings of Latinx CCB graduates exceeded university bachelor’s graduates at all points in time, from the first quarter to three years post-graduation. It is important to note, however, the favorable wage advantage for CCB graduates relative to university graduates faded three years post-graduation. Reasons for this narrowing of wages between the two groups is unknown but it may have to do with the average age of CCB graduates being considerably older than university graduates. As university graduates gain experience in employment, they may also gain in wages. Tracking graduates a longer period is necessary to speak to the longitudinal effects of CCB and university degrees on wage gains.

Research on the economic outcomes of community college students in Florida provide another important perspective on wage gains. A study comparing the wages of associates degree graduates to CCB graduates in similar programs in Florida, showed the wages of CCB graduates exceeded associates graduates by approximately \$10,000, on average, four quarters after graduation. The researchers noted, however, the wage premium for bachelor’s degree graduates varied by area of study, race/ethnicity, and gender, with male graduates seeing some of the strongest wage increases of all CCB graduates.^{xxv}

12 How do CCB and university baccalaureate graduates compare?

A recent study comparing CCB and university graduates in Washington state found important results on the demographics of the two groups. Research comparing community college to university bachelor’s graduates completing similar programs showed CCB graduates tended to be more racially diverse than university graduates, with a higher percentage of African American, Latinx, and multiracial graduates in the CCB group than the university group.^{xxvi} This same study also found a sizeable difference in gender representation in CCB programs, with 57 percent of CCB business graduates being women compared to 46 percent in university bachelor’s business graduates being female. However, in other occupations such as nursing, the gender of the preponderance of students reflected historical trends, with females dominating the bachelor’s enrollment in both the community college and university programs.

Qualitative interviews of CCB graduates revealed their preferences for attending a community college to secure their bachelor’s degrees were related to convenient access to a nearby community college campus; familiarity with faculty, staff, and fellow students through prior enrollment at the community college; and flexible scheduling to accommodate college, work, and family needs. An important observation made by several CCB graduates was that they did not think they would have gotten a

bachelor's degree were it not for their community college's conferral of a CCB degree. By being able to attend college while living at home and keeping their jobs enable students to achieve a bachelor's degree, something they never thought possible.^{xxvii}

13 Do CCB degrees prepare students for graduate education?

According to the CCBA, the leaders of numerous member institutions report CCB graduates go on to enroll in graduate programs. Qualitative research conducted by researchers affiliated with New America has also produced favorable results, showing CCB graduates have matriculated to graduate school in business, healthcare, education, and other fields. More research is needed to corroborate this anecdotal evidence, but what can be said at this time is there is strong interest among community college professionals in ensuring that their CCB graduates are prepared to pursue advanced education. For some professionals, this interest is translated into creating bachelor's degrees that do not end in terminal degrees the way AAS degrees have tended to do historically.^{xxviii}

14 Can CCB degrees increase access and close equity gaps in baccalaureate attainment?

The broad access mission of community colleges was encouraged by the Truman Commission and solidified in Illinois statute in the 1960s. Emphasizing access for all, Illinois community colleges enroll the most diverse student population of all public higher education institutions in terms of students' race, and income. This critical access lever for higher education is important to the social mobility of Illinoisians, as well as to the viability of regional economies in the state. This commitment is clearly reflected in the state's higher education strategic plan, titled [A Thriving Illinois](#) where community colleges are described as "the economic engines of their local communities" (p. 9).

Detailing strengths and opportunities for improvement in the higher education system, the state's plan acknowledges the need to improve access for racially minoritized, lower-income, first-generation, rural, and other populations while also recognizing the decline in Black student enrollment over more than a decade.^{xxix} The state's plan also calls for improving bachelor's attainment so as to create more equitable opportunities for all Illinoisians to garner living-wage earnings and economic security.^{xxx} Without improvements for racially minoritized and other underserved populations, the state is likely to see continued or even greater [inequitable achievement gaps](#).

To close equity gaps, *A Thriving Illinois* urges Illinois' higher education to implement transformative solutions, calling for improving high school to college pathways, enhancing transfer and articulation agreements, increasing affordability, and evaluating community college bachelor's degrees, as noted in the following statement in the state's strategic plan:

Develop transfer options for students holding the Associate of Applied Science degree and evaluate near-term and long-term impacts on the higher education ecosystem of establishing authority for community colleges to offer baccalaureate degree programs in specific fields. (p. 47)

This plan calls for evaluation of the impact of CCB degrees on the state's "higher education ecosystem", implying community colleges and universities. Consistent with this goal, a recent [report](#) from New America published in *Inside Higher Education* discussed the impact of CCB degrees on closing equity gaps in baccalaureate attainment, which should be a key focus of the study of CCB degrees in Illinois.^{xxxi}

15 Do CCB degrees align with Illinois' commitment to career pathways?

The commitment to build clearly sequenced and attainable career pathways leading to high-value credentials is a high priority for the state. Illustrating this point, the [ICCB website defines career pathways](#) as...

*coherent, articulated sequences of rigorous academic and career and technical courses, beginning in the ninth grade and leading to an industry recognized certificate, credential, associate or **baccalaureate degree**, and beyond. Career Pathways are particularly similar to programs of study, as defined by Perkins; however, they provide a more holistic approach to career and technical education pathways and encompass all students, including adult learners.*

This definition leaves no doubt that bachelor's degrees are important to career pathways, including programs of study for adult learners, but it leaves unclear exactly how career pathways extend to bachelor's degrees. Nationwide, many CCB degree programs align with career pathways that offer associates degrees and other sub-baccalaureate credentials, including associates degrees and short-term credentials. These pathways feature the same critical elements of career pathways that are emphasized in Illinois, including integrated and applied curriculum, work-based learning, industry credentials, and dual credit.

Illinois' approach to career pathways has been identified as a national [model](#) by the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP). Exemplary features include embedding career pathways across workforce development, adult and postsecondary education, and public benefit programs. Adding bachelor's degrees to career pathways would seem a logical next step for the state and consistent with the national leadership role Illinois has been playing in this arena.

16 What do high-quality CCB degree programs look like?

The CCBA has made a multi-year commitment to leading a national dialogue on what quality means in CCB degree programs. Through a grant from the [ECMC Foundation](#), CCBA produced an e-book presenting [20 Promising Practices](#) associated with high-performing CCB degree programs in June 2022. The ECMC grant was renewed in 2023, with a two-year commitment to publishing more promising practices. Also, in early 2023 [Ascendium](#) funded CCBA to develop a quality framework for CCB degree programs, and this grant is proceeding under the leadership of CCBA leadership team and a group of professionals experienced in implementing and leading CCB degree programs.

The *20 Promising Practices e-book* features the following six themes:

- Leadership and organizational support
- Access, equity, and outcomes
- Pathway design
- Curriculum and instruction
- Student supports
- Employer partnerships

Two new papers addressing CCB degree program quality are being released by CCBA this fall 2023. These summarize the literature of CCB degree program quality and offer recommendations for key elements of a quality framework for CCB degrees. The first [paper](#) synthesizes an extensive review of literature into four areas: 1) design elements and components of CCB degrees, 2) the assess of industry needs and labor market alignments of CCB programs, 3) equitable student access and outcomes

associated with CCB degree programs, and 4) criteria for states and systems to use in approving CCB programs. The second paper presenting elements of a quality framework for CCB degree programs will be released soon.

17 What role do employers play in CCB program approval?

Like many programs focusing on preparing graduates for the workforce, employers contribute to decisions about CCB curriculum offerings, program implementation, and program evaluation. Their roles include serving on advisory committees; advising on and making equipment, hardware, and software donations; providing work-based learning for students; and hiring graduates. Some employers also play an active role in formal instruction and mentoring students, all functions as important to bachelor's programs as they are to certificate and associates programs.

Ensuring that CCB programs are informed by regional employers, many states require applications for new CCB programs to speak directly to the role employers play in advising college leaders (administration, faculty, staff, trustees, and others) on critical decisions about new CCB programming. [Ohio's program approval process](#) stands out as a good example of a state emphasizing employer involvement in CCB program proposal and implementation processes, including requiring at least one agreement with a regional business or industry to train students in the identified field of study and employ students upon successful program completion. The names of regional business/industry partners must be provided in the community college's CCB application to the state, along with evidence of agreements to train students and employ program graduates. Letters of support from specific business/industry partners must include details about their current and future employment needs and level of involvement with the proposed CCB program in curriculum development, advisory boards, and work-based learning. These letters must also estimate how many employees the business/industry partner expects to hire, reinforcing the need for CCB graduates.

18 How are new CCB programs approved?

Once state laws authorizing CCB degrees pass, formal program approval policies and processes are developed, with standardized requirements for offering new CCB degree programs. Typically, community colleges submit an initial program application to a local board of trustees and state agency to show supply and demand results for the proposed program. Typically, this analysis of labor market information (LMI) must show strong demand for job openings in the region where the baccalaureate degree will be offered. These proposals also typically require estimates of student enrollment in the proposed program relative to other similar programs in the same region of the state.^{xxxii} If community colleges are given a go-ahead after this initial step, they are invited to submit a full proposal describing all aspects of the program, including goals, curriculum, student populations including how underserved students will access and complete, and evaluation of graduates' educational and employment outcomes. Some program applications also require input from outside experts on the viability of the program and potential impact on the regional workforce and communities.

Some CCB degree applications go further in terms of requiring proposed CCB degree programs explain how they will address college or state equity goals. A recent [Florida statute 1007.33](#) emphasizes the role postsecondary education should play in "improving the quality of life and economic well-being" of the state's residents, particularly "place-bound, nontraditional students." This law clearly stipulates that, "the intent of the Legislature [is] to further expand access to baccalaureate degree programs through the use of Florida College System institutions." Similarly, the approval process for [new CCB degrees in Oregon](#) requires colleges address how these programs will address the state's equity and diversity goals.

CCB program approval processes often also require applicants address whether a proposed CCB degree program may be duplicative of other existing bachelor's programs offered by universities in the same geographic region. Consultation may be advised or required from both two- and four-year institutions, with timelines from 30 to 90 days for this review process to be completed. CCB-authorizing rules typically do not grant refusal authority to other institutions but they do encourage communications to resolve concerns before formal deliberations begin. However, these concerns tend to lessen over time as CCB degree programs become more commonplace.^{xxxiii} Shared understanding of what CCB degrees are about and how they can add rather than detract from a state's baccalaureate landscape contributes to wider acceptance of these degrees. A good example is Washington's states recent adoption of computer science BS degrees after 15 years of limiting CCBs to the BAS. In 2021, the BS degree was adopted, followed by a [\\$3 million award from Amazon](#) to help these computer science BS degrees to meet this important regional workforce need.

19 How much time does it take to stand up a new CCB program?

After a state passes CCB-authorizing legislation, it typically takes 1 to 2 years (and sometimes more) to design and implement a new CCB program, depending on how much groundwork has been done to secure accreditation and program approval by local and/or state officials. If the college needs to secure regional accreditation, the timeline for implementation is typically longer than when regional accreditation has already been achieved through earlier adoption of CCB programs. In addition, the time that states take to approve new CCB programs can also vary quite a bit. For example, the state of California established in state statute that the California Community College Chancellor's Office would approve CCB programs twice per year, with up to 15 programs approved at each interval. This staging of approvals affects when program applications are submitted and when newly approved programs can start up. However, this format is not typically of most states as most others review CCB program applications on a more frequent, even a rolling basis, although these states may limit submissions when resources to review and approval program applications grow thin, diminishing state capacity to approve CCB programs.

It is important to know the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) that accredits community colleges and universities in Illinois has extensive experience with CCB degrees in other states, including Arizona, Colorado, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Wyoming, and others. Learning from the experiences of these states is recommended if Illinois advances to the CCB legislation authorization and program adoption stage. A resource created by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) on community college baccalaureate degree conferral may be useful to Illinois, and can be found [here](#).

20 What could Illinois learn from states that confer CCB degrees?

Whereas every higher education system is unique, Illinois could learn about CCB degrees by studying what other states are doing to authorize and implement these degrees. States like Florida, Georgia, Nevada, and Washington have implemented CCB degree programs for a long time. In fact, their experience is so extensive that these states do not consider CCB degrees a rarity. Three states near Illinois in the Midwest region of the country implement CCB degrees utilizing different legislative and administrative approaches. Michigan, Missouri, and Ohio have authorized applied bachelor's degrees in different fields of study, utilizing BAS, BS, and BSN degrees. Of these three, Ohio's CCB offerings are the most robust in terms of offering promising policy and programmatic ideas for Illinois to consider. Also due to similarities in state and regional economies in Illinois and Ohio, there are meaningful lessons for how to couple CCB degrees to evolving workforce needs. Authorizing CCB degrees in 2018, Ohio has

scaled up CCB degrees relatively quickly compared to other states in the Midwest and elsewhere in the United States, with 11 of the state's 23 community colleges having adopted one or more CCB degrees. A total of 20 CCB degrees are approved or already operate in the state. In addition, a new law authorizing BSN degrees was added in 2021, with six nursing programs approved since that time.

Looking beyond these Midwest states, lessons can be learned from other states that have adopted or updated CCB legislation in recent years. Specifically, Arizona and California are states that are seeing relatively rapid adoption of CCB degree programs in a wide array of industry sectors, including business, healthcare, education, STEM, and public services. Both states offer CCB degrees in the form of BS degrees, and Arizona also authorizes BSN degrees to nursing graduates. Recent passage of a BSN bill in Oregon is currently going into effect, with seven community colleges working collaboratively to design and share common curriculum to ensure qualified faculty no matter where the program is offered. Similar efforts are being pursued by a consortium of community and technical colleges in Washington where the state's new law authorizing BS degree conferral in community college computer science programs is taking effect.

Many more opportunities exist for higher education institutional and policy leaders to learn about CCB degrees. Hopefully the information shared here provides a baseline of information that can assist policymakers as they consider options for adoption of CCB degrees to enhance baccalaureate attainment in Illinois.

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