



Community College Baccalaureate: A Solution in Search of a Problem

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Introduction

Education reform has been on the mind of Michigan policy makers for as many years as we have provided public higher education. However, the conversation took on new meaning and energy subsequent to the Lt. Governor's Commission on Higher Education and Economic Growth convened in 2004. The commission made 19 recommendations to Governor Jennifer Granholm, and for the past three years every major educational initiative has been linked to this visioning document. One recommendation – advocating the offering of more Applied Baccalaureate programs at community colleges – has received considerable attention recently and is worth examining in greater detail. The ninth recommendation reads as follows:

1. Michigan's higher education institutions must examine the availability and geographic coverage of higher education services and put in place the necessary partnerships to ensure that residents in all parts of the state have access to two- and four-year baccalaureate programs.
2. Universities that currently grant applied baccalaureate degrees must forge new partnerships with community colleges to expand the availability of this credential. In addition, the Michigan legislature must pass enabling legislation during the 2005–2006 legislative session that defines the criteria and process by which Michigan community colleges may offer applied baccalaureate degrees in response to unmet economic, employer, or community needs in their service regions where partnership arrangements have failed to meet these needs.

In January 2008, the Department of Labor and Economic Growth (DLEG) was granted additional funds to commission a study on the issue of the applied baccalaureate, but the legislation effectively dismissed the first portion and went immediately to point two. The essence of the first point in the recommendation was to assess the needs of the entire state in an effort to identify and address existing gaps in the provision of postsecondary opportunities. The second point simply put forth an existing strategy and suggested it should be expanded to meet some of the needs identified through a comprehensive study. Instead of following the recommendation of the Lt. Governors Commission, the legislation introduced reads as follows:

From the funds appropriated in part 1, it is the intent of the legislature that the department [DLEG] identify ways to enhance local access to baccalaureate degree opportunities in applied sciences and applied technologies through better utilizing the existing capacity of community colleges. Funds in part 1 are provided to allow the department to commission an independent study to determine where in Michigan these programs would be most ben-

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The study should consider criteria such as:

- Regions that have historically been dependent on manufacturing and automotive related industries where workers have been displaced or are in transition.
- Communities that are significantly below the state average of working age adults with four-year degrees.
- Locations served by community colleges that have a strong track record for advanced technical training, workforce development programs and employer partnerships.
- Communities that do not contain a public university already offering similar degree opportunities.
- Locations where the community college has both faculty and facilities already in place that are capable of supporting baccalaureate level programs in applied technical fields.
- Evidence of employer support and future employment opportunities for graduates of the programs.

The state of Michigan missed an important opportunity with the most recent study conducted on the need to expand baccalaureate education across the state. At a time when the state has among the highest unemployment rate in the nation (above 7%), is in the top 10 states in terms of home foreclosures, and collectively ranks 34th in terms of the proportion of adults over 25 with a four-year degree, it is exactly appropriate to look at where existing needs are not being met and to find ways to fill that need. Unfortunately, the legislation calling for this study began with a solution and then went in search of a problem. Certainly challenges exist in Michigan and we should make every effort to understand the nature of those problems and to find unique and innovative strategies to meet those needs. However, policy is not well served when we use the proposed solution as a prism through which to view the problem.

The Department of Labor and Economic Growth (DLEG) commissioned study assumed that the needs in Michigan were confined to the service areas of the 28 community colleges and, as a result, it missed the opportunity to assess the needs of the entire state, including those areas served by four-year public universities where a community college is not present.¹ The legislation also introduced an added set of problems by establishing an unrealistic timeframe within which to conduct the study. The work was to begin in February and the final report was to be issued by April 1. The result was that the Voorhees group – which among other things, specializes in community college research – was the only contractor to bid on the research. In order to meet the deadline, the research was constrained to a manageable project, effectively missing the bigger picture for the needs of the state. The legislation itself is not the fault of DLEG or the Voorhees group, but it constrains the scope of the inquiry in a way that presupposes how the problem should be addressed and prevents a broader understanding of the challenges facing Michigan.

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This legislation missed an opportunity to assess the broader needs of the state but it clearly had another purpose in mind, as the 6 criteria to identify appropriate candidates for the applied baccalaureate suggest. It is plausible that attention should be focused on communities with specific sets of challenges and opportunities. The six criteria leave a number of communities out, but it may give a sense for where to begin. However, the guidance provided by these six criteria at times appears overly broad and subjective while at other times are incredibly precise. The first criterion focuses on communities that have been reliant on manufacturing and automotive industries and are facing challenges assisting displaced workers. Arguably, every community in the state can claim they qualify under this criterion because it is too general. The automotive industry alone affects a great number of Michigan communities, particularly in Southeast and Central Michigan, but when manufacturing writ large is included, most major population centers qualify.

The second selection criterion is just the opposite. It provides very specific guidelines for whether a community would be included. We know that approximately 24.5% of Michigan adults over 25 years of age held at least a Bachelor's degree or above. We also know that a community college service area is typically defined by county so it is possible to ascertain how many community colleges fall "significantly below" the state average. Significance is a subjective evaluation as well, but one might begin by simply identifying all counties below 24.5%, or by extension, eliminate those counties where Bachelor's attainment exceeds the state average. Table 1 demonstrates that 11 counties (among the 30 most populace in MI according to the US Census Bureau) exceed the state average.

¹Private higher education represents another important sector, which would reduce the number of eligible community colleges, but given the higher tuition rates and the fact that they are not state supported in a direct way, they are not included in this analysis.

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Table 1.
Bachelor's Degree Attainment by County, 2006

Washtenaw County, Michigan	51.66%
Oakland County, Michigan	42.28%
Ingham County, Michigan	36.32%
Kalamazoo County, Michigan	33.69%
Midland County, Michigan	33.30%
Livingston County, Michigan	29.69%
Kent County, Michigan	29.29%
Clinton County, Michigan	27.95%
Ottawa County, Michigan	27.56%
Isabella County, Michigan	26.84%

Source: American Communities Survey (ACS), 2006

Five of the 11 counties identified above are home to community colleges – Washtenaw, Oakland, Ingham, Kalamazoo, and Kent. If the study had followed criterion 2, Washtenaw Community College, Oakland Community College, Lansing Community College, Kalamazoo Valley Community College and Grand Rapids Community College would have been eliminated from consideration. The third criterion references the community college track record for serving the technical demands and employer needs of the area and is too subjective to approximate so it cannot be used to meaningfully limit the eligible sample. However, the fourth criterion can be used for that purpose. When we look at the number of community colleges that reside in the same counties as four-year universities, we would also eliminate Wayne County Community College, Schoolcraft College, Henry Ford Community College, Mott Community College, and Delta College. Two very objective criteria alone eliminate 10 of 28 community colleges from consideration because they either reside in the same county as a four year public institution or they have more than 24.5% of their adult population with a Bachelor's degree or above.

The final two criteria are perhaps the most difficult and problematic to measure and as such, require a bit more specific attention. The fifth criterion suggests that only community colleges that have the staff and facilities in place would qualify and this revenue neutral approach speaks directly to the existing tension between efficiency and quality in the context of the existing missions of our respective state institutions. The final criterion addresses employer support and the future potential for workforce demands. Very few employers were contacted in the context of this study and given the changing nature of the workforce, many estimates suggest that the top growth jobs will exist in areas that do not exist today. We can only assume then, that community colleges are in touch with their communities' needs, which they have done very well historically, and that employers are equally aware of what opportunities will exist in the future. The Voorhees group did not identify which

institutions responded to the survey, but conservatively, only 18 institutions would have qualified and 23 responded. It is likely some proportion of those non-respondents were from eligible communities so we expect that fewer than 18 of the responses included in the analysis fit these criteria.

Defining the Applied Baccalaureate

The heart of the issue is partly definitional but equally philosophical. Baccalaureate education has always been highly valued in part because students are taught to be effective and adaptable learners who can reinvent themselves in a global market, which is a different definition than what an applied degree connotes. The primary difference is the expectation for broad-based general education. A major limitation of this study was that it did not provide a clear enough definition of what constitutes applied baccalaureate education. The Voorhees group put forth the following definition:

A degree program that builds upon the technical content gained at an associate's level. The combination of technical and higher level courses prepare graduates for higher level job opportunities related to their area of technical specialty. The Bachelor's of Applied Science and Technology degree is designed to provide students with the opportunity to complete a baccalaureate program.

The first portion of the definition is similar to the definitions put forth by other states that have adopted some form of applied baccalaureate, particularly focusing on the technical content at the associate's level. However, it differs in two important ways from other states: (1) it is less specific and (2) within the definition it drops the applied orientation of the degree. Consider the definition put forth in Florida, where community colleges have been given some discretion to offer the applied baccalaureate:

The Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) is the designated degree for flexible baccalaureate programs that are designed to accommodate the unique demands for entry and advancement within specific workforce sectors. BAS programs provide degree completion opportunities for students from a variety of educational backgrounds, but primarily those with A.S. degrees or the equivalent. BAS degree programs conform to all articulation conventions (including common course prerequisites, common course numbering, and faculty credentialing in accordance with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools). BAS degree programs typically include capstone experiences that provide opportunities for students to demonstrate the application of acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies.

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Inherent in the Florida definition is an understanding that the degree designation is intended to meet unique local workforce demands (covered in the six criteria discussed above) and an understanding of the nature of the baccalaureate curriculum. Note that in Florida, any applied baccalaureate must conform to a state wide articulation agreement. At the College of St. Petersburg, an Associates granting institution, the guidelines were even more stringent noting that the programs had to be extensions of existing associates of applied sciences (rather than simply the AS identified above) and that all programs had to include the state standard of 36 credit hours of general education and a foreign language.

Beverly Bower, expert on the community college baccalaureate from Florida, points out a challenge implicit in the definition above that is essential to the implementation of the Bachelor's of Applied Science (BAS). Florida, like Texas and others to adopt variations of the community college/applied baccalaureate program, has a highly coordinated higher education structure, which includes common course numbers, coordinated curricular expectations, and statewide articulation agreements. Those conditions do not exist in Michigan. The important point regarding the definition is that when it is kept overly broad, it provides no guidance in terms of what qualifies and what does not, which will be discussed in a moment. The responses suggested that the community colleges are interested in offering a broader array of baccalaureate programs than one might categorize as "applied." In another brief we will discuss the intersection of the unique and differentiated purposes of both community colleges and universities and the evolution of baccalaureate education, which is fundamentally a critical definitional issue.

In Response to the Findings and Conclusions

Not surprisingly, without specific guidance regarding what constitutes an applied baccalaureate, the community colleges overwhelmingly identified programs that already exist as BS and BA degrees in colleges and universities. In simple terms, it may be useful to suggest that a program already established at the baccalaureate level as a BS or a BA would not also be offered as an applied baccalaureate. In fact, colleges and universities already have an established mechanism for distinguishing applied baccalaureate programs. For example, a student may complete a Bachelor's of Fine Arts (BFA) or a Bachelor's of Social Work (BSW), if those were the specific fields into which they planned to enter. They are not "applied" in the same sense as those framed in terms of science and technology, but they focus more directly on the knowledge, skills and aptitudes expected in their respective professions. The difference is that they are subject to general education requirements consistent with the existing standards at the university.

For the past several years, community colleges in Michigan have been advocating for their ability to offer a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN), and the results clearly suggest that this is foremost on their mind today as well. Nearly 81% of all institutions responding they would like to offer the applied baccalaureate identified nursing as one of the programs. From a different perspective more than 22% of the 77 programs identified were nursing programs. In another brief, we will address the challenges inherent in the focus on the BSN. The Bachelor of Science (BS) is a well-established baccalaureate track in colleges and universities and it would not constitute an “applied” degree, which suggests something different than the already established baccalaureate education provided by four-year colleges and universities.

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Education is another degree that would not meet any criterion suggesting it is an applied degree, beyond what might be “applied” in any major course of study. Teachers earn a BA and in many cases are likely to continue to pursue a Masters degree in their major area or in education – an issue which should be discussed in the context of the applied baccalaureate. Teaching poses an additional challenge because despite what the Voorhees group reports on the need for teachers, that demand simply does not exist in Michigan as it does in other states. Michigan has a shrinking school aged cohort and it pays teachers higher than most states in the nation. Even in the “high demand” areas of math, science, and special education, the need is not as great as other states experience. Seven additional institutions identify business related programs which may or may not overlap with existing four year programs and the same is true in the health related professions. It is not clear from the summary presentation whether the programs in these areas fit within an existing baccalaureate degree framework or not. It would be interesting to apply a Florida or a Texas standard to the programs identified to see how many identified programs might actually be considered “applied” elsewhere.

For the most part, many of the limitations of this study result directly from the way in which the problem was crafted in legislation and those limitations have been articulated above. However, the researchers in this case are in part responsible for several important limitations. As mentioned earlier, they put forth a very broad definition of an applied baccalaureate as guidance for responding to the survey. However, in the second portion of the study, they point out there are very specific, clearly identifiable ways to specify what constitutes an applied degree. Muffo, Voorhees, and Hyslop (2008) suggest

One logical definition that one might use is that a bachelor's degree in applied science or science technology is any program that grows out of an existing associate degree of applied science or technology, i.e. one that typically is not transferable to a traditional BA or BS program (p. 8).

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In fact, the definition articulated above is similar to the one utilized for St. Petersburg College in Florida. The researchers point out two limitations. The first is a problem for Michigan specifically in that they do not use common terminology for all degree programs, so greater care would be required to differentiate those that transfer from those that do not. The second is where the researchers appear to have inserted a political agenda into the research findings. They go on to say later in the same paragraph that

...if one were to limit bachelor's degree consideration only to those programs that are labeled an associate of applied science or technology programs, a range of other associate programs which might be considered for the baccalaureate degree would be eliminated despite their vocational or technical nature (p. 8).

For one, it might eliminate the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) which the vast majority of campuses identified as a possible candidate. The research on this question would have been stronger if they had established a clear, specific definition based upon what exists in the field, use that as guidance for completion of the survey and then compare the actual responses to the definition to suggest which of those actually meet the definition. They suggest it would be too difficult to differentiate among the myriad variations in the titles of programs. In terms of the amount of time they were given, they are probably right. But that should not suggest for a moment that it is not possible to develop a mechanism for sorting and identifying which programs are transferable to the BS or BA and which are not. But broadening the definition in this way and altering the terminology to include vocational (which casts a wider net than applied science and technology) casts a shadow on the degree to which this research has maintained a standard of objectivity necessary in a highly political debate.

Perhaps most troubling was their conclusion that, given their findings, a broader interpretation of the legislation is appropriate. The section assessing the degree to which the community colleges meet the six criteria articulated in SB 234 demonstrates very clearly that comparatively few institutions would qualify to offer an applied baccalaureate. They suggest it may be limited to SE Michigan and as articulated above, even there, the concentration of universities is greatest. It is at this point in the research that it becomes apparent that the research team contracted to do this work has a position on whether community colleges should be able to offer baccalaureate degrees and their judgment prevents them from recognizing that Michigan already has a model in place for offering transferable baccalaureate programs through the university center model, prominently promoted by Al Lorenzo, President of Macomb Community College. The advantage of the university center model is that it addresses the geographic access

many community colleges provide and it provides a measure of external quality control because the universities are the sponsors of the baccalaureate programs and they ensure what is taught is consistent with what their accrediting body recommends. It also recognizes and affirms the important and complementary roles community colleges and public universities play in the provision of higher education.

In subsequent briefs, we will address the nursing issue specifically given that it was clearly the most important finding in the study. The nursing crisis is national in scope and it is not simply a matter of training more nurses. Shortages exist in the number of nurse faculty, clinical supervisors and adequately prepared prospective students. We will also return, in a third brief, to the broader issues of purpose and the unique challenges of asking community colleges to assume yet another purpose while simultaneously achieving a set of efficiencies that may not materialize if community colleges truly begin to offer baccalaureate education. In the end, it would have been useful to assess the economic and employment needs of the state, but assuming those needs only exist in the 28 communities with two-year colleges was a disservice to the state and it fell short of the expectations articulated in the Cherry Commission.

More troubling is the notion that we can identify a solution before we have fully understood the nature of the problem and the range of possible approaches to addressing that problem – doing so makes for poor policy. In this study, DLEG was charged to conduct a study on a highly political issue and the result was a survey asking a group of institutions if they wanted to offer something they have already fought to offer. When they said yes, the study allowed them to define what it was they wanted to offer and accepted their word that the program constituted an applied baccalaureate, they would meet local demands, and they would do so in a revenue neutral way...at least in terms of faculty and facilities. They may have a sense of their workforce demands, but we question their assumptions regarding whether they have the faculty and facilities in place. This issue will be taken up in a subsequent brief.

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CONCLUSION

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Community colleges have been charged with playing a critical set of roles in our state's educational and economic landscape. They educate those many of the least prepared students for college; they respond to many of the unique labor demands for communities; they provide opportunities for adult workers; and they prepare a cadre of students for the transfer into four-year institutions. That is a lot to expect from any one sector and they should be commended for playing these roles. However, we should not expect that we can simply add another mission to their plates, even if they ask for that role. It has been and continues to be the primary mission of four-year colleges to provide the highest quality baccalaureate education for more than a century. It is simply unfair to community colleges to ask them to offer the applied baccalaureate and it devalues what our four-year colleges and universities provide and the intentionality with which they provide it.

If we hope to address this issue well in Michigan, we should assess where our needs have gone unmet, identify possible solutions and engage in a broader conversation among state policy makers, community colleges, public universities and the private sector (both non-profit and for-profit). There are a number of ways to meet the existing demand, but none of them include identifying a solution first and then seeking out the problem.



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