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Not every California student can afford to transfer. Community college bachelor's degrees could help



By **SUBMITTED**

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Since the implementation of state Assembly Bill 927 in 2021, students have faced an unexpected barrier to expanded educational opportunity — one that runs in direct opposition to the bill's intent.

The bill authorized community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees, so long as those programs don't duplicate those offered by a California State University (CSU) or University of California (UC).

Yet as community colleges have looked to expand bachelor's degree programs to meet workforce needs, many proposals have faced opposition from CSU campuses, stalling the growth of new degree offerings.



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CSU leaders have argued that bachelor's degree programs should not duplicate existing university offerings, and have expressed concern that expanding community college degrees could blur the distinct missions of California's higher education systems.

Those concerns deserve consideration, but they should not outweigh the needs of students who cannot realistically access a CSU campus because of cost, work or family obligations.

The real question is not which public system awards a bachelor's degree. It is whether California is giving students a realistic opportunity to earn one.

Introduced in 2010, the California Community Colleges' (CCC) "degree with guarantee" model allows for its students to receive guaranteed admission at a participating four-year college or university once they complete their associate degree at one of their community colleges.

The model has clearly expanded access to four-year institutions. Between 2013 and 2024, bachelor's degree attainment among California-born young adults rose from 26% to 35%. California also leads the nation in community college participation, with six in ten incoming community college students intending to transfer to a four-year university.

Over the years, California further streamlined transfers to four-year institutions by implementing a statewide common course numbering system known as state Assembly Bill 1111, to make it easier for students to identify transferable courses across colleges, and adopting the California General Education Transfer Curriculum, a singular, unified lower-division general education pathway for transferring students.

However, these efforts do not address affordability, which is often the deciding factor in whether students continue their pursuit of a bachelor's degree.

Solely investing in the transfer model assumes that every student can afford a four-year institution. Affordability goes beyond tuition. One must consider housing, transportation

Of the roughly 1.8 million community college students in California, a majority of them are low-income, first-generation students of color. Many of these students, especially older students, are anchored to their location due to responsibilities such as juggling work, caring for younger siblings, their own children or aging and sick family members, or are simply unable to meet the cost of relocating or commuting to a four-year institution.

Proximity to a public university plays a strong role in these students' transfer rates. Living just 25 miles away from a public university can be enough to negatively impact the likelihood that a student will transfer to a given institution. Distance to a higher ed institution matters — 60% of the community colleges that have the lowest transfer rates in California are rural and hours away from a four-year institution.

Through my work with 10,000 Degrees, a college success nonprofit helping students of low-income and first-generation backgrounds to and through college, I've worked with many community college students who are looking to transfer to their local four-year institution. These schools may not often be students' first choice, but they are the most financially viable option. 10,000 Degrees serves 16,000 students and families annually.

Our student transfer success is twice the national average. However, despite the comprehensive guidance and support our organization provides, more than 50% of students do not transfer within six years. Through one-on-one meetings, our students tell us that financial pressures and unmet basic needs — such as food and housing insecurity — often require them to prioritize work or short-term certificate programs over transferring.

Expanding the bachelor's degree programs at community colleges would help close the degree attainment gap. Offering a more diverse range of programs would give students of low-income and first-generation backgrounds the opportunity to earn a bachelor's degree without destabilizing their journey through transfers and financial burdens. It would allow them to remain connected to the local jobs, resources and support systems they tell us they need.

Some argue that California Community Colleges should focus solely on investing in transfer pathways. The value of our transfer pathways is undeniable. While there is always room for improvement, the conversation should not just focus on preserving one pathway to higher education at the expense of another. Instead, it should focus on expanding all the other aspects that enable students to earn a degree.

Expanding bachelor's degree programs at community colleges is not about replacing CSU or UC or diminishing the value of transfer pathways. What higher education institutions should be asking is, "What choices will enable more students to earn a degree?"

If we, as education leaders, are more concerned with guarding access than expanding opportunity, we are not advancing equity — we are perpetuating inequality. By expanding bachelor's degree pathways and strengthening transfer opportunities, we open doors for the next generation of community leaders while investing in a stronger workforce, a more resilient economy and a more equitable future for all.

Tania Requeses is program director of the Community College Success Program at 10,000 Degrees, which provides college scholarships, financial aid advice and near-peer mentoring to students from low-income backgrounds.

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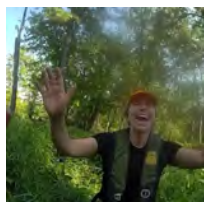
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