



LESSONS FROM IMPLEMENTATION

Pioneering the Community College Baccalaureate in California

The Experience of West Los Angeles College

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RESEARCH DEMONSTRATES the economic and social benefits of completing a baccalaureate degree. It also underscores persistent inequities in degree completion and the advantages of holding a bachelor's degree when entering the labor market.¹ California's significant challenges with income inequality, in fact, are largely driven by lower rates of college access and completion among Latina/o/x, Black, Native American and low-income residents.² In addition to economic benefits, college degrees can also lead to non-monetary benefits including more frequent voting and improved health outcomes.³ While the evidence of the importance of obtaining a baccalaureate degree is clear, data suggest that – absent increased access to affordable higher education – a high number of low-income students in California will not earn a college degree.⁴

The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) identified the need for more than a million additional bachelor's degree holders in California in the coming decade, especially in critical economic sectors.⁵ PPIC projects that to keep up with the demand for a college-educated workforce, the state would need to increase the number of baccalaureate degrees awarded by 40% by 2030. Given the increasingly critical role that baccalaureate degrees play in our state's economy, community college baccalaureates (CCBs) could be a key strategy to ensure that many more Californians obtain one.

In this brief, we provide a short synopsis of the California and national research base on CCBs, highlight lessons learned from the successful design and implementation of the dental hygiene CCB program at West Los Angeles College (WLAC), and conclude with recommendations for policymakers and other community colleges that may develop CCB programs in the future.

California Community College Baccalaureate Programs

A community college baccalaureate (CCB) broadly refers to a degree conferred by an institution that primarily offers associate degrees and a limited set of baccalaureates.⁶ In 2015, California passed legislation to allow a baccalaureate degree pilot program in 15 California community colleges. CCBs are offered in a variety of applied disciplines, such as automotive technology, dental hygiene, biomanufacturing and industrial automation. More than 1,500 students have enrolled in CCB programs across California since 2015 and, as of 2020, over 80% of the graduates reported being employed in their field of study.⁷

In 2021, California lawmakers approved legislation to expand and make permanent the California Community College bachelor's degree pilot program. Assembly Bill 927 was signed by Governor Gavin Newsom with the backing of many educational leaders, businesses, and trade organizations. AB 927 eliminated the 2026 sunset date on existing baccalaureate degree programs and allowed for up to 30 additional community college baccalaureate degree programs to be developed statewide per year.

Research to Date on CCBs

Several entities have examined the effectiveness of CCBs in California. An evaluation by the California Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) found that more than half of students surveyed would not have pursued a bachelor’s degree if their community college program had not been offered.⁸ While the LAO cited multiple ways in which the fledgling CCB program could be improved, it also highlighted important benefits, including low cost for students, high graduation rates and students’ success obtaining jobs after graduating from these programs.⁹ Similarly, Hoang, Vo and Rios-Aguilar provide evidence that CCB programs in California are enrolling underserved groups of students, including first-generation low-income students of color (see [California’s Community College Baccalaureate Programs: Benefits and Opportunities](#)).

Nationally, several studies have documented the benefits of CCBs.¹⁰ Other studies have shown that CCB programs provide more flexible scheduling and affordable pathways to the bachelor’s degree, reduce the barriers associated with transfer, and offer more directed student services.¹¹ Supporters of CCB adoption have also noted that CCB degree programs focus on meeting the needs of community stakeholders by responding directly to high-demand fields identified by local employers.¹² Finally, researchers have found that CCB adoption has a positive influence on overall associate degree production as CCB students earn an associate degree before transferring into the baccalaureate program.¹³ This means that CCBs are a tool to increase both baccalaureate and associate degrees.

Other studies show more mixed results,¹⁴ however, finding that the adoption of CCBs has not led to increases in the number or diversity of students earning bachelor’s degrees, for example, in teacher education in Florida.¹⁵ Another study found that early CCB adoption (before 2017) is associated with increases in tuition and fees at public community colleges.¹⁶ To date, few studies have focused, as this brief does, on understanding issues of implementation of the CCB. We approach this focus and contribution to the research base through close study of the development of the dental hygiene program at WLAC.

A Brief History of WLAC’s CCB Program in Dental Hygiene

In 1978, WLAC established an Associate of Science in dental hygiene program. After the establishment of a CCB pilot program in 2015, California community colleges were authorized to confer baccalaureate degrees if selected by the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO). Only one community college in a district could apply to pilot a CCB program and each applicant was required to provide substantial documentation. WLAC used the following sources in their application: student demographic data; cost of WLAC tuition compared to other dental hygiene programs in California (Table 1); the number of annual applicants; surveys of students, employers, and alumni; and graduation and employment rates.

Table 1. Comparison of the WLAC Dental Hygiene Program to Other Dental Hygiene Programs in the Region, 2021

Program	Program Length in Years	Total Semesters	Total Quarters	Cost Per Semester/FT	Program Tuition Cost	Additional Fees	Total Cost
West Coast University	3.5	7		\$17,300	\$121,100	\$11,788	\$132,888
Loma Linda University DHBS	3.5		7	\$10,492	\$73,444	\$18,068	\$91,512
University of Southern California	4	8			\$109,296	\$12,748	\$122,043
University of the Pacific	3						\$90,000
West Los Angeles College	4	8			\$8,858	\$15,000	\$23,858

In addition to these sources, WLAC also examined workforce trends and labor market data to ensure the employment prospects of degree earners in the program. Per state requirements of the pilot program, the college secured the following to receive approval:

- ✔ Approval from the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) Board of Trustees
- ✔ Approval from the CCCC and Community Colleges Board of Governors
- ✔ Support from the dental hygiene faculty at WLAC. The faculty developed the upper-division courses in dental hygiene and collaborated with other faculty to create upper-division general education courses
- ✔ Approval from the dental hygiene advisory board at WLAC
- ✔ Approval from accrediting and licensing/governing bodies including the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), the Commission on Dental Accreditation, and the Dental Hygiene Board of California
- ✔ Establishment of a baccalaureate task force that included representation from the college registrar, financial aid, counseling, articulation, admissions and records, discipline faculty, Accreditation Liaison Officer, District Information Technology, and administrators
- ✔ Notice of intent to establish a baccalaureate program to the college and district academic senates, to the department council, college council, and consultation with AFT 1521 (faculty union)

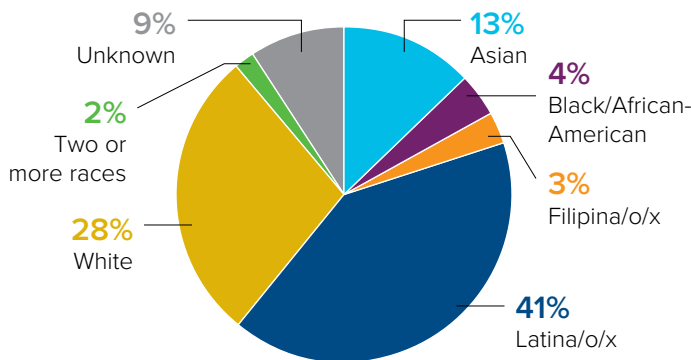
- ✔ Support from professional organizations: California Dental Hygiene Educators Association, California Dental Hygiene Association, American Dental Hygiene Association, and Western Society of Periodontology
- ✔ Letters of support from universities, such as the University of California, San Francisco and the University of California, Los Angeles, to establish a pathway from the baccalaureate program to master’s degree programs

CCB Outcomes at WLAC

After a highly competitive process that lasted several months, WLAC was selected as the CCB pilot for the LACCD. In 2018, the first cohort of 28 students obtained their baccalaureate degree. Since its establishment, the dental hygiene baccalaureate program has produced an 83% completion rate within three years, 100% licensing examination pass rate, and 100% job placement rate among completers.

From the start, WLAC’s goal for establishing a CCB pathway focused on increasing equity in BA degree opportunity and attainment and in diversifying the dental hygiene field. At the same time, the college also increased the number of faculty, staff, and administrators of color. Figures 1 and 2 and Table 2 show enrollment rates in the program by race/ethnicity, gender, and age.

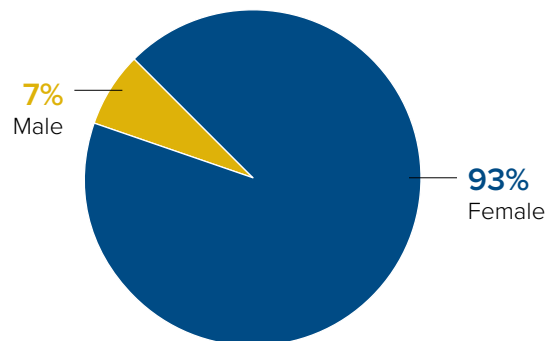
Figure 1. Total Enrollment in WLAC CCB Program by Ethnicity/Race, Cohorts 2016–2020



Source: CCB Institutional Records Data: Cohort and Graduation

Note: Students identified as American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander comprise of 0% of CCB enrollments at WLAC

Figure 2. Total Enrollment in WLAC CCB Program by Gender, Cohorts 2016–2020



Source: CCB Institutional Records Data: Cohort and Graduation

Note: Students identified as non-binary comprise 0% of CCB enrollment at WLAC.

Table 2. Total Enrollment in WLAC CCB Program by Age Group, Cohorts 2016–2020

Age Group	Number	Percent
19 years-old or younger	0	0.0%
20–24 years-old	51	25.4%
25–29 years-old	72	35.8%
30–34 years-old	42	20.9%
35–39 years-old	17	8.5%
40–49 years-old	17	8.5%
50 years-old or older	2	1.0%
Total	201	100%

Source: CBB Institutional Records Data: Cohort and Graduation

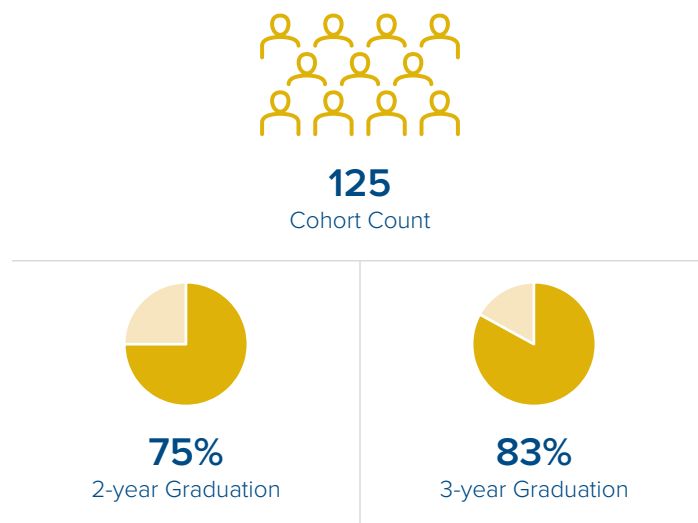
In WLAC’s program, 75% of students earn their BA within two years; 83% within three years (Figure 3).¹⁷ Furthermore, data indicate WLAC’s CCB program has been successful in enrolling and graduating Latina/o/x and older students.

Supports Necessary for Success

As CCB programs have grown, so has our understanding of the broad support they need to be successful. That includes support from college administrators, the academic senate, bargaining units, upper-division course developers, the California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC), and external partnerships in the form of employers and other organizations. Figure 4 (see page 5) shows the elements that helped WLAC’s dental hygiene program move from design to successful implementation – pillars that continue to sustain and improve the program. Also central to WLAC’s CCB program are institutional efforts to diversify the dental hygiene profession by providing greater equity of opportunity to obtain a bachelor’s degree.

As California seeks to grow bachelor’s degree attainment for students who have been underrepresented in four-year degree programs, our examination of the evolution of CCBs at WLAC offers several important lessons for policymakers and for practitioners looking to initiate their own CCB programs. The following recommendations are derived from our observations and from interviews with WLAC staff who piloted the dental hygiene program.

Figure 3. Graduation Rates for WLAC CCB Program, Cohorts 2016–2020



Source: CBB Institutional Records Data: Cohort and Graduation

Recommendations for Policymakers

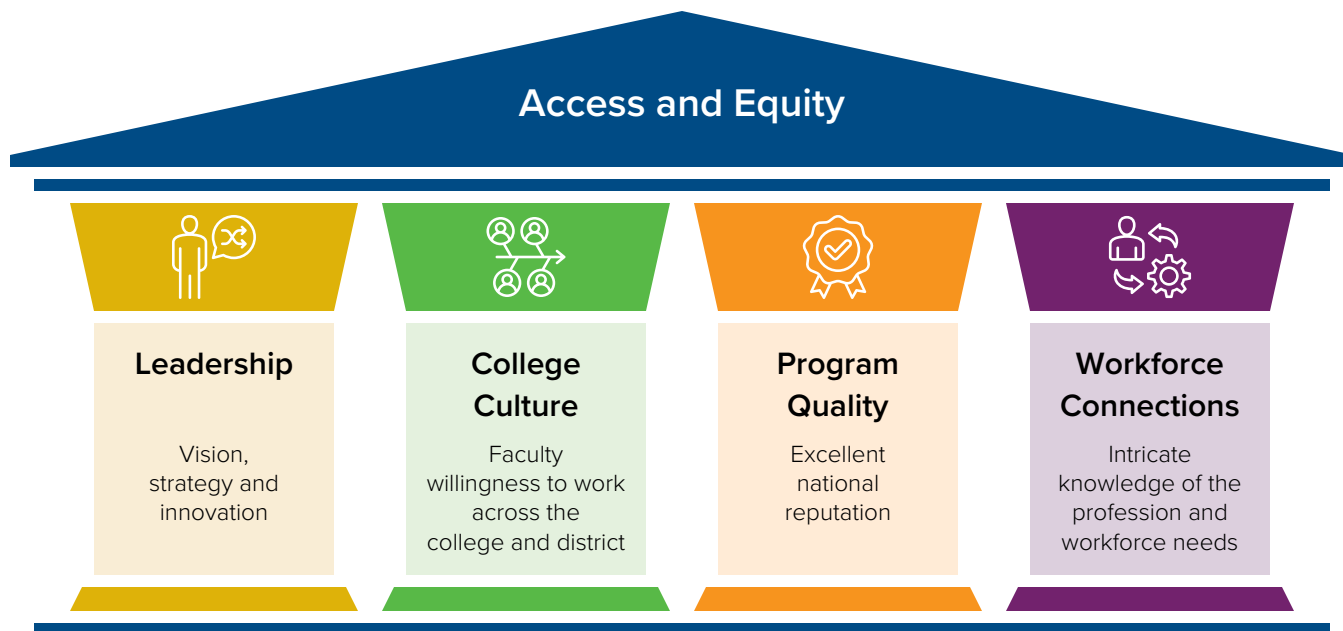
1. Adjust State Funding and Create New Systems of Support

California’s current community college funding model, the Student Centered Funding Formula (SCFF), should be modified to reflect the higher cost of baccalaureate delivery. SCFF was established in the 2018–19 State Budget as a new way to allocate funds to community college districts with a focus on three main components: enrollment, equity, and student success.¹⁸ Given its intent to address student equity gaps, the formula should bring funding for colleges that deliver CCB completions to a level that approaches that received by other public baccalaureate-granting institutions in California: CSUs and UCs. Failure to address these discrepancies perpetuates inequities in California’s postsecondary system and sustains deficit thinking toward community colleges in California.

Proposed changes to the SCFF that would adequately fund CCBs include the following:

- In recognition of the higher costs of providing upper-division courses, students enrolled in the 3rd and 4th year of a CCB should be funded at a higher rate than their counterparts in lower division courses. This would be consistent with the SCFF’s provision of higher funding rates for other higher-cost special populations.

Figure 4. WLAC's Four Pillars of Access and Equity



- SCFF performance funding points awarded for students who attain CCBs should be higher than points awarded for attainment of AA/AS degrees. Points awarded per BA degree attainment should be double the points awarded for Associate Degrees of Transfer (ADT), given that CCB programs (120 units) are double the number of ADT units (60 units).
- Community colleges should receive funding recognition in the formula when CCB students transfer to graduate degree programs, as colleges currently receive funding recognition when a student transfers to a four-year university.

2. Increase Compensation for Faculty Delivering CCB Curriculum

Faculty who teach in CCB programs, who are now paid on par with faculty who deliver AAs or ADTs, should be compensated at higher levels. CCB faculty are expected to hold an advanced degree (MA/MS or higher), obtain a certification or a license, and perform at the level of CSU and UC faculty. In programs such as dental hygiene, external accrediting bodies establish criteria that must be met and that exceed Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) standards. These criteria include required student passage of national, state, and licensing exams. Along with these higher expectations, the state should reward and stabilize faculty delivering successful programs, equitably, with high returns for students and the economy.

3. Increase Financial Aid for CCB Students

As allowed under AB 927, in-state students admitted to the WLAC dental hygiene program pay higher tuition – \$130 per unit – than students in associate degree or certificate programs – \$46 per regular unit. As a result, to complete the required 65 upper division units, students pay \$8,450. In addition to paying tuition, students must purchase textbooks, uniforms, professional instrument kits, malpractice insurance, federal and state licensing exams, and other dental hygiene supplies, totaling up to \$13,000 in the first year and an additional \$6,000 the following year. These expenses come on top of housing and living costs.

Nearly all students in WLAC's baccalaureate program receive some form of financial aid. As they segue to upper division coursework, they remain eligible for Pell Grants and Cal Grant B. Unlike students in four-year universities, however, they are not eligible for Cal Grant A, which covers tuition and fees for up to four years. This means that CCB students are not eligible to receive the \$12,000 that Cal Grant A offers. Additionally, once students begins CCB programs they are no longer eligible for the CA Promise Grant (formerly known as the BOG fee waiver), which waives enrollment fees for the entire school year.

The total cost of attending a CCB program needs to be considered when providing students their financial aid package. To alleviate student expenses, California should provide Cal Grant A for CCB students. Failure to address the cost of attendance to specific programs that are directly connected to the job market may result in students failing to complete their baccalaureate degrees, and consequently, loss of economic benefits to both the student and the state.

4. Improve (or Build) Data Infrastructure and Research on CCBs

The state has recently made the decision to invest in a Cradle-to-Career Data System¹⁹ that tracks students across the various segments of their educational trajectories. This system will follow students prior to and through their CCB experience and into the labor market and/or graduate school. At WLAC, since the dental hygiene program began as a pilot program, the district did not invest in advancements to its Student Information System (SIS) at the outset. Currently, each community college must flag students who participate in the CCB in their own data system, and subsequently create their own infrastructure and accounting mechanism to track participation in the program. It is also vital to build upon the Chancellor's Office Curriculum Inventory System – an existing database of support documents for CCBs in California – in order to create networks of support and establish more implementation resources for leaders and practitioners. The database includes program structures/models and upper division and major courses. Similarly, this database could be used to market programs in different places, including high schools, employment centers, unions meetings, and colleges. Finally, there is a need to create a robust research infrastructure that monitors and continuously assesses the impact of CCBs and that can help colleges learn from each other to improve their programs.

Recommendations for Practitioners and CCB Developers

1. Be Intentional about Program Structure

CCB leaders at WLAC advise that colleges use the four pillars depicted in Figure 4 (see page 5) – leadership, college culture, program quality and workforce connections – to guide their efforts to establish a CCB.

2. Align to Local Job Markets

CCB programs should be intentional about selecting programs that lead to employment opportunities, better wages, and opportunities for master's degrees. Most promising are high-unit programs in industries that continue to evolve in skillsets that require additional training beyond an associate's degree.

3. Learn from Those Who Came Before

Community colleges looking to pilot a CCB program should attend community college baccalaureate association conferences or workshops to gather resources and develop a full understanding of what a CBB entails.

4. Consider Student Concentrations

CCB programs would also benefit from establishing different concentrations for students who are interested in research, education, or health services management to expand access to master's programs.

Conclusion

As California moves to produce more bachelor's degrees, particularly for Black and Latina/o/x students, California CCB programs have increased both access and attainment for participating students. Programs such as WLAC's dental hygiene CCB have shown what is possible: high graduation rates at a low cost for students who are working adults, low-income, and students of color. The economic and labor market demand for a diverse, college-educated workforce is clear, and community colleges offering CCBs have shown they can contribute to meeting it.

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Endnotes

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