



## Legislative White Paper

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# Expanding Opportunity & Strengthening Illinois' Workforce: The Case for Community College Baccalaureate Degrees

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*Illinois faces a critical opportunity to expand its higher education pipeline and meet workforce needs by authorizing community colleges to confer bachelor's degrees in applied, high-demand fields.*

Across the country, 24 states now permit some community colleges to offer bachelor's programs yielding positive outcomes in workforce development and educational attainment. In Illinois, legislation has been proposed to join this movement, with Governor JB Pritzker and state education leaders voicing strong support ([oakton.edu; diverseeducation.com](http://oakton.edu/diverseeducation.com)).

This white paper provides an analysis of the **Community College Baccalaureate (CCB)** model and its advantages. It outlines how a workforce-focused approach—limited to fields like nursing, early childhood education, business, and cybersecurity—can benefit students, strengthen Illinois's economy, and enhance the role of community colleges, all while complementing the state's university system. Evidence from other states' implementations and data on Illinois's workforce needs are used to make the case that authorizing CCB degrees is a prudent policy solution. The goal is to inform Illinois state legislators of the compelling reasons to enact CCB degree authority in Illinois as a strategy for affordable educational access, equitable degree attainment, and targeted workforce development.

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## Overview of the Workforce-Focused Baccalaureate Model

### *Applied, High-Demand Fields*

Community College Baccalaureate programs are carefully tailored to **applied disciplines with workforce shortages**. Unlike traditional liberal arts degrees, CCB degrees focus on

career-oriented fields such as **Nursing (BSN), Early Childhood Education, Business Administration, Information Technology and Cybersecurity, Public Safety**, and other high-demand sectors ([ecs.org](https://ecs.org)). These programs build upon the two-year associate curriculum by adding upper-division coursework with a practical emphasis. Importantly, the applied baccalaureate degrees typically include fewer general-education credits and more technical or professional courses aligned with industry needs ([ecs.org](https://ecs.org)). The emphasis is on producing graduates who can fill specific roles that are in short supply in the local economy. The focus is on alignment of CCB programs with workforce-focused disciplines. Illinois's proposed model likewise limits community college baccalaureates to “**high-demand fields**” explicitly to address skills gaps without duplicating the broader array of programs offered by universities ([oakton.edu](https://oakton.edu)).

### ***Needs Selection and Non-Competition with Universities***

A critical design feature of the CCB model is the **process for selecting programs** so that community college offerings address unmet needs and do not threaten nearby four-year institutions. In states with CCB programs, approval criteria typically require demonstrating significant **employer demand and student demand** for the proposed degree in the region ([ecs.org](https://ecs.org)). Community colleges must often document that **no local university offers the same program or enough program capacity**, ensuring CCB degrees fill a gap rather than draw students away from existing public universities ([ecs.org](https://ecs.org)). For instance, **California's pilot program** (SB 850) authorized a limited number of community college B.A./B.S. degrees only in fields *not* offered by the California State University or University of California systems in those areas ([ecs.org](https://ecs.org)). Many other states (e.g. Colorado, Ohio, Texas) likewise have statutes or board policies mandating a review of potential **program duplication and competition** before a new community college baccalaureate is approved ([ecs.org](https://ecs.org)). Some set additional limits: **Texas and California cap the number of baccalaureate programs** each community college can offer, and states like **Michigan and South Carolina restrict the types of bachelor's degrees** (for example, permitting only Bachelor of Applied Science or only certain fields such as nursing) ([ecs.org](https://ecs.org)). These policy guardrails keep the mission focused on workforce programs rather than a broad expansion into liberal arts or research-oriented degrees. As a result, the **community college sector's bachelor's degrees are complementary** to the university offerings. In fact, research on Florida's two-decade experience found that community college bachelor's programs had **minimal impact on public university enrollments**, instead attracting students who likely would have not entered a university or who might have attended costly for-profit institutions ([ecs.org](https://ecs.org); [accbd.org](https://accbd.org)).

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## **Advantages for Students**

Community college baccalaureate programs offer Illinois students several key advantages by virtue of their affordability, accessibility, career relevance, and focus on equity. By enabling

place-bound and nontraditional students to complete bachelor's degrees, CCB programs can transform educational and career outcomes for thousands of Illinoisans.

## ***Affordability***

**Lower Tuition and Reduced Debt:** Community colleges are known for low tuition, and this carries into their bachelor's programs, making them a highly affordable option for earning a four-year degree. Tuition and fees at community colleges are typically a fraction of the cost of public universities, which helps remove financial barriers for students ([ecs.org](https://ecs.org)). A student pursuing a bachelor's through a CCB program generally pays the community college rate for the first two years (associate level) and a slightly higher but still moderate rate for the upper-level years – overall spending significantly less than they would at a four-year campus. For example, in **Florida's community college system**, the **average total cost of a bachelor's degree** from a community college is about **\$13,000**, well below what students would pay to attend a public university for four years ([accbd.org](https://accbd.org)).

**Financial Aid Access and Local Savings:** Importantly, community college bachelor's students remain eligible for federal and state financial aid (Pell grants, MAP grants in Illinois, etc.), and because tuition is lower, a given grant or scholarship covers a larger share of costs. Many students may even cover their community college bachelor's tuition entirely through grants, something far less likely at a four-year institution. In surveys, Illinois community college students have expressed willingness and desire to pursue a bachelor's if it were financially and geographically feasible: fully **75% of Illinois community college students said they would seek a bachelor's degree if they could do so at their community college** (avoiding the higher costs of transfer) ([diverseeducation.com](https://diverseeducation.com)).

## ***Accessibility***

**Geographic Access and Convenience:** Community college baccalaureate programs greatly improve the **accessibility of four-year education**, particularly for students who are place-bound or have work and family obligations. Illinois has many "education deserts" – areas where residents do not live near a broad-access public university campus. Recent studies estimate **35 to 40 million Americans** nationwide live in education deserts with no or only one nearby four-year college option ([ecs.org](https://ecs.org)), and parts of rural downstate Illinois fall into this category. Allowing local community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees means students in those regions can earn a four-year credential **without uprooting their lives**. This is critical for working adults and those with family commitments. In Illinois, **78% of community college students are employed while in school**, and many have dependents ([oakton.edu](https://oakton.edu)). The **seamless continuation** from associate to bachelor's at the same institution eliminates the transfer hurdles that often derail students. The transfer process (applying to a university, moving, credit loss, increased cost) can be a barrier in some cases. By **offering the full pathway at the community college**, CCB programs remove those barriers. Indeed, in interviews with community college bachelor's students, the **majority said they would not have pursued a bachelor's at all if their community college program hadn't been available**.

**Serving Adult and Nontraditional Learners:** Community college baccalaureate students tend to be older and more rooted in the community than typical university students, underscoring the accessibility benefits. Data from Washington State’s community colleges show the **average age of a CCB student is 32**, compared to 23 for community college students overall. Similarly, a study of Florida CCB programs found that 47% of the graduates were age 30 or above. Many are balancing school with jobs and family. Community colleges are adept at supporting such learners – offering convenient locations, smaller class sizes, tutoring, and advising geared to part-time and returning students. CCB programs leverage these strengths. Students can remain in a supportive, close-to-home environment all the way through the bachelor’s level instead of potentially getting lost in the shuffle at a large university.

### ***Career Advancement and Workforce Relevance***

**Upward Mobility for Students:** Earning a bachelor’s degree at a community college can open doors to **career advancement that would be closed with only an associate degree**. Many professions now recognize the bachelor’s as the entry or promotion credential. Students who are already working in their field can advance from technical or entry-level roles into higher positions upon completing the CCB degree.

**Workforce-Aligned Curriculum:** Part of why CCB graduates see career benefits is the **workforce-aligned nature of the curriculum**. Community colleges design these bachelor’s programs in close collaboration with local employers and industry advisory boards. As noted in a policy analysis, two-year institutions are often **more nimble than four-year universities in developing and modifying programs to respond to changing workforce demands** ([ecs.org](https://www.ecs.org)). They have deep ties to local businesses, enabling ongoing communication about the skills needed in emerging fields ([ecs.org](https://www.ecs.org)). As a result, community college bachelor’s programs tend to emphasize practical skills, internships or clinical experiences, and applied projects that translate directly to the workplace.

### ***Equity in Higher Education***

**Serving Underrepresented Students:** Community college baccalaureate programs have been identified as a powerful tool for advancing equity in higher education attainment. They tend to enroll a **more diverse student population** – in terms of race/ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic background – than many traditional four-year programs. Community colleges already serve the majority of minority, first-generation, and low-income college students, and extending their offerings to the bachelor’s level means more of those students can successfully earn a four-year degree. Nationally, there are stark gaps in bachelor’s degree attainment: about **35% of white adults hold at least a bachelor’s degree, compared to only 18% of adults from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups** ([ecs.org](https://www.ecs.org)). Similarly, adults in rural communities and many urban low-income communities have far lower B.A. attainment rates than the state average.

**Improving Transfer and Completion for Vulnerable Groups:** Perhaps the most significant equity benefit is improving bachelor’s completion for those who start at community colleges. As

noted, only **16% of community college entrants nationwide achieve a bachelor's within six years**, and for Black students that figure is a dismal 9%, for Hispanic students 13%, and for adult learners (25 and older) only 6% ([insidehighered.com](https://www.insidehighered.com)). These low rates are due to many factors – financial constraints, transfer credit loss, competing life responsibilities – but the result is that minority, low-income, and adult students are disproportionately unable to ever earn a four-year credential under the status quo. Community college bachelor's programs can change that equation. In Illinois, authorizing CCB degrees would specifically aid regions and populations with low bachelor's attainment. For example, African American and Latino students comprise a large share of community college enrollments in the state; providing an option for them to continue to a bachelor's at those colleges could help Illinois close racial gaps in degree attainment. Likewise, rural districts and small towns from southern Illinois to western Illinois have capable students who never complete a four-year degree because the nearest public university is too far or too costly.

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## **Advantages for the State of Illinois**

Implementing community college baccalaureate programs would yield substantial benefits not only for individual students, but for the **State of Illinois as a whole**. By addressing critical workforce shortages, driving economic growth, promoting equitable degree attainment, and making efficient use of educational resources, CCB degrees offer a strategic policy tool for Illinois to meet its talent and economic development goals.

### ***Addressing Workforce Shortages in Key Industries***

Illinois is experiencing workforce shortages in several industries that are vital to public well-being and economic vitality. These include **healthcare (nursing and allied health), early childhood education, information technology and cybersecurity**, and certain areas of **business and public safety**. The pipeline of workers with appropriate bachelor's-level training in these fields is not keeping up with demand. Authorizing community colleges to offer bachelor's programs targeted to these high-need areas would directly help alleviate these shortages by expanding the pool of qualified graduates.

**Healthcare (Nursing) Shortage:** Illinois faces a well-documented nursing shortfall. The Illinois Nursing Workforce Center projects a shortage of nearly **15,000 registered nurses by 2025** in the state ([ana-illinois.org](https://ana-illinois.org)). This gap has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the wave of retirements in the aging nurse workforce (over half of Illinois RNs are over age 55) ([ana-illinois.org](https://ana-illinois.org)). A major bottleneck in addressing the RN shortage is the limited capacity of nursing education programs; universities and community college associate programs together are not graduating enough new nurses to replace those leaving.

**Early Childhood Education Shortage:** Another urgent need is in early childhood education (ECE) and childcare. Illinois has committed to expanding access to early learning (through

initiatives like Smart Start Illinois), but a shortage of qualified early childhood educators threatens these efforts. Many preschool classrooms and childcare centers cannot find lead teachers who hold the required bachelor's degree and teacher licensure. In fact, Illinois passed the **Early Childhood Access Consortium for Equity (ECACE)** Act in 2021 to help more childcare workers advance their credentials, recognizing that traditional routes were insufficient. Childcare shortages due in part to staffing gaps are estimated to **cost Illinois' economy \$4.9 billion annually** in lost productivity and revenue ([votervoicenet.org](https://www.votervoicenet.org)). Community college bachelor's programs in Early Childhood Education (including pathways to professional educator licensure for pre-K to grade 2) would directly address this shortage.

**Tech and Cybersecurity Workforce:** In the technology sector, Illinois (particularly the Chicago metropolitan area and emerging tech hubs in central Illinois) is experiencing a surge in demand for IT and cybersecurity professionals. Nationally, over **660,000 cybersecurity jobs are currently unfilled** ([granger.illinois.edu](https://www.granger.illinois.edu)), and Illinois has thousands of those vacancies – more than 10,000 cybersecurity job openings were recently reported in the Chicago area alone. Employers in finance, healthcare, manufacturing and government need more analysts, security engineers, and IT managers than the current pipeline provides. Community colleges have responded by creating associate programs and certificates in cybersecurity and information technology, but many employers prefer candidates with a bachelor's degree for these well-paying roles.

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## **Economic Growth and Competitiveness**

### ***Human Capital Development***

Expanding baccalaureate attainment through community colleges will bolster Illinois's long-term economic growth. A well-educated workforce is a cornerstone of attracting employers and high-quality jobs to the state. By increasing the number of bachelor's degree holders – especially in applied and technical fields – Illinois can improve its “human capital” metrics that businesses consider when locating operations. Each additional college graduate contributes to higher productivity and innovation in the economy. Illinois has set an ambitious attainment goal (60% of adults with a postsecondary credential by 2025) because it recognizes the link between education and economic prosperity ([illinois.gov](https://www.illinois.gov)).

### ***Meeting Employer Needs and Attracting Investment***

Employers across Illinois report difficulty in finding candidates with the right mix of skills and credentials for today's jobs. By addressing talent shortages (as discussed above), the state makes itself more attractive for business expansion. For example, if manufacturers know that Illinois's community colleges produce bachelor's-trained technologists and managers, they may be more inclined to expand factories or R&D centers in Illinois. If healthcare systems see a strong local pipeline of BSN nurses and health administrators, they can grow services in Illinois



communities. In the tech sector, having robust cybersecurity and IT programs statewide can attract tech startups or encourage existing companies to keep operations local, knowing they can hire from nearby colleges. In essence, CCB programs are an **economic development strategy** – they align higher education output with the needs of the state’s industries, fueling growth.

### ***Economic and Fiscal Returns***

Investment in community college baccalaureate programs can be highly cost-effective for the state budget. As detailed in a later section, these programs are relatively low-cost to operate compared to adding equivalent capacity at universities, yet they yield high returns in terms of graduates produced. Each bachelor’s degree added is associated with increased lifetime earnings. On average, individuals with a bachelor’s degree earn roughly 30% more than those with an associate degree, and have substantially higher employment rates. This earnings premium means more taxable income and less reliance on social services, producing a positive fiscal return on the state’s educational investment. An analysis of childcare workforce shortages pegged the cost to Illinois at \$4.9 billion per year in lost economic activity ([votervoicenet.org](http://votervoicenet.org)); by expanding the qualified workforce via CCB degrees, Illinois can recapture some of that lost GDP and enable more parents to participate in the labor force (because childcare and preschool become more available) ([votervoicenet.org](http://votervoicenet.org)). In health fields, addressing nurse and teacher shortages also has economic multipliers (healthier population, better early education outcomes leading to a stronger future workforce).

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## **Equitable Degree Attainment Statewide**

### ***Regional Equity – Serving All Parts of Illinois***

Illinois is a state with diverse regions, and bachelor’s degree attainment is not evenly distributed. Residents in the Chicago metropolitan area have greater access to universities and generally higher degree attainment rates than those in many downstate or remote areas. For Illinois to prosper as a whole, educational opportunity must extend beyond the traditional university hubs. Community colleges are located in all 39 college districts covering the state, including rural and small-town areas where bachelor’s attainment lags. Authorizing community college baccalaureates will allow those areas to **grow their own college-educated workforce**. This can help shrink the urban-rural divide in education.

### ***Closing Demographic Gaps***

Illinois also grapples with racial and economic disparities in higher education. While the statewide postsecondary attainment is around 55%, the rates for Black and Latinx adults are significantly lower (in many areas, the B.A. attainment for Black adults is in the teens percent). Community college baccalaureate programs can be a linchpin in state strategies to close these gaps. Because community colleges disproportionately enroll students of color and those from low-income families, improving bachelor’s completion within this sector directly benefits those

groups. Other states' data have shown that CCB programs enroll high percentages of minority students – for instance, Washington's community college BAS programs have a student population slightly **more diverse than similar programs at universities**. By implementing CCB degrees, Illinois can similarly create pathways that *intentionally serve underrepresented students*.

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## **Cost-Effective Expansion of Public Higher Education**

### ***Efficient Use of Existing Infrastructure***

From the state's perspective, authorizing community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees is a cost-effective way to expand capacity in higher education. Illinois already has a robust network of 48 community colleges with campuses, facilities (classrooms, labs), faculty, and accreditation to grant associate degrees. Leveraging this infrastructure to deliver upper-division coursework can be far less expensive than building new university branches or expanding existing universities to reach new populations. Community colleges often have **smaller class sizes and lower faculty salary scales** than universities, which can translate into lower instructional costs per student for upper-level courses. Additionally, community colleges frequently have empty classroom capacity during daytime hours (as many community college students attend part-time or in the evenings) – this capacity could be utilized by bachelor's programs without significant new construction. States that implemented CCB programs have generally not needed to create entirely new campuses; they simply extended programs at the community college.

### ***Maximizing State Educational Investments***

Illinois invests significant funds in both its community college system and its public university system. The CCB model encourages *coordination* between the two, rather than competition, thereby maximizing the return on state investments. For instance, community colleges can partner with universities to share faculty or facilities for certain specialized courses, reducing duplication. In some cases, universities may welcome community colleges taking on applied bachelor's programs that the university does not offer, freeing universities to focus on other programs. From a budgeting standpoint, supporting a student to complete a bachelor's via 2 years of community college + 2 years at community college (CCB) could entail lower state subsidy than 2 years community college + 2 years at a university (because community college funding per student is typically lower). Thus, if even a portion of transfer-intending students instead complete at their community college, the overall public subsidy per degree may decrease.

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## A Pivotal Moment

Illinois stands at a pivotal moment to strengthen its higher education system and workforce by embracing the Community College Baccalaureate model. The evidence from other states is clear: carefully implemented CCB programs *expand educational opportunity, address workforce skill gaps, and produce graduates who contribute meaningfully to the economy*. By limiting these bachelor's degrees to applied, high-demand fields and coordinating approvals to avoid duplication, Illinois can ensure that community college baccalaureates complement our universities and serve unmet needs. The advantages are compelling: students gain affordable, accessible pathways to career-advancing credentials; employers gain a larger pool of qualified talent (helping to fill critical shortages in nursing, teaching, IT, and more); the state makes progress toward its attainment and equity goals; and community colleges are empowered to fully serve their communities and thrive in a competitive education landscape.

Policymakers should consider authorizing a **workforce-focused CCB pilot program** in Illinois, with a framework for quality assurance and collaboration between community colleges and universities. Key safeguards – such as requiring demonstrated workforce demand, regional university concurrence or non-objection, program accreditation, and periodic program review – can be written into the legislation to ensure high-quality outcomes. Illinois can draw on best practices from states like Florida (which integrated CCBs as part of its Florida College System) and Washington (which uses a thorough approval process via the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges) ([ecs.org](https://www.ecs.org)). By starting with a limited number of programs in fields like Nursing BSN completion, Early Childhood Education, and Applied Technology, Illinois can pilot the concept, evaluate results, and expand as appropriate.

Awarding Community College Baccalaureate degrees in Illinois is not a radical departure, but rather a **strategic extension of our educational system** to meet the challenges of today's economy. It is a policy solution backed by research and successful case studies, and it aligns with Illinois's values of educational accessibility, equity, and pragmatic problem-solving. Illinois has long been a leader in higher education; this is an opportunity to lead in innovation and inclusivity by empowering community colleges to confer bachelor's degrees. For the Illinois General Assembly, enacting CCB legislation would be a forward-thinking step that invests in our home-grown talent and keeps Illinois competitive. The evidence-based arguments presented in this report demonstrate that the time is right to make the community college baccalaureate a reality in Illinois. We urge policymakers to support this initiative to expand affordable baccalaureate education for the benefit of students, communities, and the state's prosperity.

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