

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Two-year colleges chasing more bachelor's degrees

Schools hope to evolve despite state deficit

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You might say Washington's two-year colleges are growing up.

With increasing pressure to up the production of four-year degrees in Washington state, a few community and technical colleges have been adding baccalaureate programs to their course catalogs -- and they'd like to add even more over the next decade.

By 2018, the state's 34-college system wants to be producing 1,900 applied bachelor's degrees every year -- up from the roughly 140 produced by just seven colleges now.

Those plans, however, hinge on the approval by a Legislature that's faced with a rapidly escalating budget deficit: \$5.8 billion over the next 2 1/2 years at last count. In short, many lawmakers aren't looking to spend more on lofty ambitions -- they're looking to make cuts.

"What our goals are and what the picture is are probably two different things right now," said Jan Yoshiwara, education services director for the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges.

The state's community college system hasn't dealt strictly in associate degrees and certificates for some time, largely because of partnerships with public universities that maintain branches on the two-year campuses. But now community college officials say their own missions have to evolve further.

That goal has a lot to do with the fact that a two-year degree just doesn't get you as far as it used to.

"I think that a lot of positions are now requiring four-year degrees," said Jan Vafa, a Bellevue Community College student who says she'd enroll to earn a bachelor's degree if a program was available. "When I started out, if you were a warm body and knew how to turn on the computer, you were good. Now they want at least a bachelor's degree, and they want experience on top of that."

Maybe the most ambitious goal comes from BCC, where administrators would like to gradually start offering a handful of bachelor's degrees. Those programs -- like those already offered at seven community colleges around the state -- would emphasize job skills over more traditional academic studies such as the humanities.

BCC already offers a four-year degree in radiology. They want to add more, including business intelligence, bio-informatics and cybercriminology.

"The people who want jobs are finding employers need a little more than what they have," BCC spokesman Bob Adams said. "Bachelor degrees are required in a whole lot of positions. Before, you could have been all right with skills training. Now it takes a bachelor degree."

In an e-mail, Adams added: "Our concept is, in effect, a 'hybrid' college that would retain the programs and accessibility of a community college but also provide the bachelor's degree programs that are lacking in the Central Puget Sound region. We most definitely will not abandon our existing community college mission."

The state's funding crisis is likely to hit community colleges hard -- possibly even harder than their four-year counterparts. The system of colleges has been asked to brace for a 20 percent funding cut, which would mean layoffs among faculty and staff, an enrollment cap and the indefinite postponement of a number of ambitious plans.

Those cuts fly in the face of the Higher Education Coordinating Board's projection that 5,600 additional baccalaureate enrollment slots will be needed statewide by 2010 to keep pace with population growth. (Washington public four-year institutions awarded nearly 21,000 bachelor's degrees in 2006.)

So despite a gloomy outlook in terms of funding for community colleges and the rest of higher education, BCC will likely press forward with its plan, which requires authorization but not immediate funding from the Legislature.

"We need more baccalaureate degrees and in high-demand fields," said HEC Board Chairman Bill Grinstein. " And I think the future for these kinds of efforts is promising."

A pilot program approved in 2005 authorized seven colleges to launch four-year degrees. Among those is South Seattle Community College's hospitality management degree and Lake Washington Technical College's applied design program -- slated to launch next fall.

South Seattle is among 24 of the state's 34 colleges that offer four-year degrees through another university -- in South Seattle's case, City University.

And like BCC, Lake Washington Technical College also has an ambitious 10-year plan.

"In the next 10 years, one of the goals is to be an institute of technology," said Sharon McGavick, president of the Kirkland-based college. "To have two-year and four-year degrees as well as certificates, so we have all of the pathways, all of the exit points covered."

Yoshiwara said the community college system as a whole will keep pressing to offer more four-year degrees -- specifically in regions where there's significant unmet need. This winter, system administrators will seek money from the state to launch new programs at the colleges that already offer a baccalaureate degree and to start adding similar programs at other schools.

"But these are in our budget request -- so these may not happen in the next biennium," Yoshiwara said.

Ultimately, the system is shooting to have a third of its technical students go on to earn a four-year degree. Right now, that's true of just 10 percent.

HIGHER ED-REPORT CARD

An independent report on American higher education flunks the state of Washington on affordability of college, but says the state is doing a commendable job at helping students earn degrees once they start taking classes.

The biennial study by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, which evaluates how well higher education is serving the public, gave "F's" for affordability to 49 states. Only

California earned a passing grade in the category, because it has relatively inexpensive community colleges.

The affordability grade is based on how much of an average family's income it costs to go to college.

The report said poor and working-class families in Washington must spend 36 percent of their income, in addition to financial aid, to pay for tuition at a two-year college.

-- *The Associated Press*

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