Considerations for Scaling Up Quality Community College Baccalaureate Degrees

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Introduction

Knowing most community colleges are not authorized to offer bachelor's degrees in the United States, the growth of community college baccalaureate (CCB) degrees where it is allowed is noteworthy. The most recent national inventory reveals CCBs are offered at 187 community colleges across 24 states, equating to about 20 percent of all community and technical colleges in the country. The 678 CCB programs inventoried in 2024 are up by 15 percent from two years prior, when 583 CCB programs were identified (Community College Baccalaureate Association & Bragg & Associates, 2024). Recognizing the scaling up of CCB degrees as a form of higher education innovation is important for several reasons, especially because of their potential to increase baccalaureate access and attainment for historically underserved student populations.

This trend toward CCB conferral has not been without critics. While students, employers, and community groups tend to support CCB degrees offered regionally (Bragg & Soler, 2017), concerns about mission creep, duplication, and quality persist from four-year university leaders (Bragg et al., 2021; Love & Turk, 2023). CCB-conferring states address these concerns in different ways, with most new CCB programs approved by institutional curriculum committees, local boards of trustees, and ultimately the coordination and oversight of state agencies (Floyd & Skolnik, 2019). Such requirements provide for some standardization of CCB degree programs that address concerns, but the approaches to ensuring quality of CCB degree programs vary from state to state.

About this brief

In this brief, we discuss considerations for what the evolving scale-up of CCB degrees means for quality programming. We posit that developing a collective understanding of CCB quality should inform the future development of CCB degree programs and help advance policy on CCB degrees throughout the United States. Because CCBs are so new to many parts of the country, it is important for states and colleges newly adopting CCBs to understand the purpose and potential of these degrees to address some of higher education's stickiest inequities in baccalaureate access and attainment.

Our study is intended to inform future work on CCB quality and to support state and institutional efforts to ensure quality CCB programs where data support their adoption. What makes for quality in CCB degree programs needs careful consideration, as public trust in these degrees will help determine the pace and reach of their scale-up when and where justified.

Informed by earlier literature and practitioner-focused data collection activities, we asked practitioners and policy leaders in Oregon and Washington to participate in focus groups and to take a survey about what quality CCB degree programs mean to them. We recorded different factors influencing CCB quality elements, paying close attention to how the scale-up of CCB degree programs may influence how practitioners think about quality. We hope this research will generate ideas that can inform the thoughtful evolution of quality CCB degree programs in the future.

CCB Quality and Scale

Understanding program approval

Before considering CCB quality and scale, it is important to understand how these programs come about. When a state passes CCB-authorizing legislation, it often specifies how new CCB programs will get approved, and those policies and procedures often specify elements of CCB program design and implementation that must be addressed. Though it can happen in numerous ways, CCB program approval is typically conducted by state agencies that have coordination and oversight authority for new programs in that state. These approval processes determine which CCB degree programs will receive a green light to proceed to implementation, sometimes after review and comment from other higher education institutions including universities in the state.

In addition, regional accreditation is required when a community college pursues its first bachelor's degree because colleges adopting CCB degrees are required to change their institutional status from associate- to bachelor's-conferring. In 2020, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) developed guidelines for community colleges seeking to offer their first bachelor's degree, addressing numerous quality assurance criteria, including: mission; ethical and responsible conduct; institutional effectiveness, resources, and planning; and teaching and learning. The Southern Association of Colleges and Universities (SACS), Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), and other regional accreditors also offer guidance on quality assurance for community colleges adopting CCB degrees.

Program approval and its tie to quality and scale

Why does understanding the administration of CCB degrees matter to CCB quality and scale? The ways new CCBs are approved creates a sort of template or roadmap for applying quality elements (or requirements) to the new degrees. Regional accreditation and state guidance set the course for quality CCB degree programs in some states but not all. Little is known about the extent and nature of variation in CCB program approval and oversight from state to state, clouding a full understanding of what quality means for CCB degrees.

The goal of our research on CCB program quality in relation to scale-up is to help increase the understanding of the trajectory of CCB degree program adoption and sustainability in the United States. **We posit that developing a collective understanding of CCB quality should inform CCB degree program scale-up and sustainability while helping to advance policy on CCB degrees in states yet to adopt them.** To fully understand what is happening with the adoption of an innovation like CCB degrees, we believe it is important to consider the ways in which CCB program quality is viewed, addressed, and anticipated in the future in different contexts.

What does it mean to scale up an educational innovation like CCB degrees? There are many definitions of scale-up, but we especially appreciate the perspective that Jeanne Century, an educational researcher at the University of Chicago Data Science Institute, brings to scaling up innovations in education. Century (2007) states that scaling up refers to enlarging the scope, reach, and impact of an educational innovation or a new idea entering the educational landscape. In this case, we see CCB degrees as an innovation that expands access to bachelor's degrees for learners who might not otherwise get an opportunity to attain a baccalaureate. As such, CCBs benefit individuals but also communities, states, and potentially the nation if the scaling of these degrees continues to accelerate.

Century (2009) offers four guiding principles relevant to scaling up CCB degree programs: (1) "don't invest in making changes last; invest in continuous lasting change"; (2) "invest in reforms and strategies designed to last"; (3) "every investment should be an investment in learning"; and (4) "increase the tolerance for risk" (p. 22).

With these principles in mind, the scale-up of CCB degree programs is about long-term change to higher education systems toward broadening access and participation in bachelor's degrees. In this regard, CCB degrees should benefit all students who attain them, as well as the communities and states in which students live and work. CCB degrees represent a continuous, lasting change to advance higher education, including community college education as an essential public good.

Further, Christina and Nicholson-Goodman (2005) cite four dimensions to scaling up educational innovations in K-12 education that seem relevant to CCB degrees:

- **Spread** refers to growing ideas and innovations so that others observe, understand, adopt, and implement them.
- **Depth** refers to making a positive impact on intended audiences, including tangible evidence of more equitable student access, participation, and outcomes pertaining to baccalaureate attainment, in the case of CCB degrees.
- **Sustainability** refers to ensuring innovations endure beyond the excitement of initial implementation, requiring long-term commitment of resources and support.
- **Shift in ownership** refers to transferring knowledge and authority to broaden understanding of and appreciation for innovations as a public good.

In sharing these dimensions, we are not suggesting that CCB degrees are a necessity for every community college or even every community college student in the country. In fact, this is the antithesis of what strategic scale-up looks like. What we are saying is that solid evidence should be used to make a case for planning, designing, and implementing new CCB degrees. The case for scaling CCB degrees should withstand scrutiny just like the approval processes used to start and grow any other educational program.

Research Underway on CCB Quality

Some research is underway on CCB quality. Particularly, the Community College Baccalaureate Association (CCBA) began to explore CCB quality through a seed grant from Ascendium Education Group in 2023. The purpose of the seed grant was to: (a) determine if CCB practitioners think a CCB quality framework is important for the field, and (b) determine what the major elements of CCB quality might be. To work towards these two purposes, CCBA conducted a literature review, facilitated small group conversations, and convened a Quality Advisory Taskforce, culminating in nine proposed elements of CCB quality.

Literature Review: CCBA first conducted a literature review to understand what is already known by researchers and practitioners about CCB quality. It drew on over 50 sources and surfaced four broad categories relating to CCB quality: (1) The design elements of CCB degrees programs; (2) the assessment of industry needs and labor market alignment of CCB programs; (3) equitable student access and outcomes associated with CCB programs; and (4) criteria for states and systems to use in approving CCB programs (Pawlicki, Kersenbrock, & Garcia-Beaulieu, 2023a).

Small Group Conversations: CCBA also conducted small group conversations with 25 individuals from across the U.S. with various experiences with CCBs. The purpose of these conversations was to (a) ascertain if the participating stakeholders thought a CCB quality framework is necessary and helpful, and (b) to learn about what they believed to be elements of quality from their experience with CCBs.

Quality Advisory Taskforce: Throughout, CCBA convened a Quality Advisory Taskforce, composed of 18 CCB stakeholders from across the country. The goals for the taskforce included: (a) providing direction and input on the literature review and small group conversations; and (b) advising CCBA as they explore a CCB quality framework. The taskforce participated in discussions through a series of three virtual meetings throughout 2023.

Thought Paper on Nine Elements of Quality: CCBA used findings from the literature review, small group conversations, and the Quality Advisory Taskforce to create a thought paper that proposed nine elements of quality for CCBs:

1 **High level of learning:** CCBs should promote a high level of learning, including holding high expectations for student learning that are met with high support. Programs should prepare students for graduate programs, should they choose to continue their education after baccalaureate completion.

2 **Equitable access and outcomes:** CCBs are in a position to address historic inequities in higher education because they serve a diverse population. CCBs should consider the social and cultural dimensions to learning, including attending to equity in access, course content and delivery, student services, financial aid, transportation, and student outcomes.

3 **Affordability:** Affordability is a key, and often most important, consideration for students when choosing a baccalaureate program. Providing CCBs that remain affordable helps work toward equitable access, allowing greater accessibility to baccalaureate degrees for underserved students.

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Flexibility: Flexibility in CCBs includes providing thoughtful, consistent course scheduling and varying modes of course delivery. **4**

Experiential learning: Work-based learning, project-based learning, paid internships, and other experiential learning opportunities are important components of CCB degrees, especially considering the applied nature of many CCBs. Such experiences better prepare students for the workplace, put classroom learning into context, and bolster the workforce relevance of the courses and programs. **5**

Industry partnerships and collaboration: Workforce partnerships and collaboration, aligning curriculum to workforce needs, and assembling employer advisory councils all help bolster the workforce relevance of CCB programs and improve employer perceptions of CCB programs and their graduates. **6**

Student services: Quality in CCBs is holistic and should go beyond curriculum. High quality student supports, like financial aid, academic advising, tutoring services, and career services, are all considerations of overall CCB quality. **7**

Regional labor market significance and alignment: CCBs should be responsive to industry, workforce, community, and student needs. CCB leaders and practitioners should use labor market information in the development and continuous improvement of CCB programs, and that LMI data should be available to students early on so that they can make informed choices about their degree program. **8**

Evaluation: Evidence-based programs and practices: CCBs should use data when making programmatic or curricular decisions and to understand student performance. Data should be disaggregated to better understand equitable outcomes for students. **9**

It's important to note that the present work is not an evaluation of the nine elements but rather an effort to gather further insight from community college leaders and practitioners as it relates to CCB quality.

Methods

In this research, we sought to understand how the issue of quality would strike policy leaders and practitioners.This study builds on a line of research conducted on CCB degree programs over the last two years, including:

- *Watch Them Grow*, a national inventory of CCB degree programs
- A report to be released later this year documenting key elements of CCB program approval processes in 10 states
- The Lightcast Supply and Demand Analysis tool used for case-making in states that authorize CCB conferral
- Resources and tools to help states without CCB degrees to make an evidence-based case to adopt these credentials in their states, such as *Student Access to Community College Baccalaureate Degrees in the 50 States*
- A thought paper presenting nine elements of quality, discussed earlier in this brief

For this brief, we convened a group of experienced CCB practitioners and state leaders from Washington and Oregon to discuss CCB degree program quality. We chose these two states because of their close proximity to one another yet differing history with CCB degrees and state coordination of community college education.

We first observed Washington's Baccalaureate Leadership Council (BLC) meeting in October 2024. The BLC is made up of baccalaureate degree program college leaders and is tasked with guiding the adoption and promotion of CCB degrees. During the two-hour session that we observed, BLC members inquired into the meaning and expectations for CCB program quality.

In Oregon, we convened state agency and local community college leaders on a 90-minute Zoom to delve into what quality CCB degree programs means in their early adoption activities, anticipating how quality may be addressed as new CCB degrees mature and more programs come on board in the future.

We also surveyed participants in both states using a brief online survey. The first question asked respondents to rate how important they think a common set of quality elements is to planning, implementing, and evaluating CCB degree programs, and the second question asked them to summarize in their own words what makes for a quality CCB degree program. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of the nine elements of quality presented earlier in this brief and to suggest additional elements that may be missing from the list.

Data analysis included coding our researcher notes and transcripts for the meetings, identifying themes specific to each state and those shared between the two. Similarly, we summarized the survey results independently for each state and then aggregated the results to identify patterns across the two. We shared a draft of this brief with research colleagues and the study participants from both states to obtain additional insights.

Results

State Context

Knowing the context of community and technical colleges is important to understanding what the scale-up of an education innovation like a CCB degree should look like, contributing to policies and practices that ensure quality CCB degree programs emerge and endure.

Washington and Oregon sit side by side in the northwest corner of the United States. Their proximity helps explain their long history of sharing policies and practices across state borders, and the CCB degree is no exception. Both states have emphasized applied bachelor's degrees since the beginning, although Washington has recently added bachelor of science in computer science programs. Both of these states have prioritized CCB degree programs designed to prepare graduates for employment in regional economies, and both continue their commitment to open access for community college education.

That said, there are major differences in how the two states have approached the adoption and scale-up of CCB degrees. For instance, Washington's history with CCB degrees began in 2005, when a state law was passed to create pilot bachelor of applied science (BAS) degrees in three community colleges and one technical college. Legislation continued to evolve to lift the pilot status and grant the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) sole authority to approve new CCB degrees following the closing of the state's Higher Education Coordinating Board in 2012. The state's recent authorization of bachelor of science (BS) degree adds this credential to BAS and bachelor of science in nursing (BSN) degrees.

Looking back over the last 20 years, Washington's CCB policies have evolved considerably, including engaging local college leaders in CCB guidance through the Baccalaureate Leadership Council (BLC). By early 2024, at least one BAS, BSN, or BS degree was authorized at every community and technical college in the state.

Oregon's history with CCB degrees is shorter, beginning with Senate Bill 3 passed in 2019 to allow any community college in the state to offer applied baccalaureate (AB) degree programs upon approval by the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC). The Office of Community Colleges and Workforce Development within the HECC plays a critical role in supporting community colleges to submit applications consistent with the state's CTE guidelines for new program approval. State policies for new CCB degree programs are undergoing review at this time, heightening interest in issues pertaining to CCB program quality.

As Oregon established its own CCB policies, state leaders looked to Washington to understand their approach to CCB degree program approval, reviewing Washington legislation and policy to determine where Oregon might integrate lessons. As a result, there are strong parallels in some features of CCB programs across the two states. However, the nuances of Oregon's approach to the CCB is evident in the state's differing coordinating structure from Washington, with Oregon's approval of AB degrees conducted by the HECC that coordinates higher education in the state. By comparison, Washington's SBCTC has authority for community college education separate from the governance of public four-year universities in the state (see Table 1).

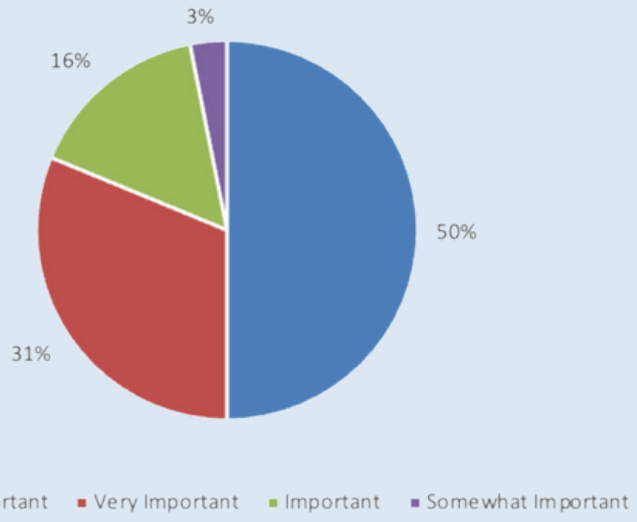
Given the similarities and differences of the two states, we wanted to understand how the issue of quality would strike policy and practice leaders. As noted, our survey asked participants to rate the level of importance of establishing a common set of quality elements for CCB degree programs (Figure 1). Across the two states, 32 people responded to the survey, with the majority from Washington, which makes sense given the larger presence of CCB degrees there. The majority of respondents in both Oregon and Washington believe it is extremely important (50 percent) or very important (31 percent) to establish a common set of quality elements for CCB degree programs. Another 20 percent rated this idea important or somewhat important, with no survey respondent saying quality was not important to CCB degree programs. This finding may not be surprising, given the multiple methods states and institutions use to attempt to build quality into new programs. That said, it was important to know in the context of future work of CCBA in creating a new CCB quality framework.

These results confirm the importance of considering quality in the creation and expansion of CCBs across the two states, despite their different history and experience with adopting and scaling up these degrees. Knowing this is the case, we approached our analysis of additional data on quality CCB degrees from the standpoint of understanding the perspectives of state and college leaders within each state context, utilizing the definitions and guiding principles on innovation scale-up offered by Century (2007, 2009) and Christina and Nicholson-Goodman (2005). Because of Washington's longer history with CCB degrees, we start with this state's results, then move on to Oregon.

Table 1. Comparison of Oregon and Washington Legislation and Approved CCB Degrees

State	Date First CCB Law Passed	State Laws on CCB Degrees	Number Colleges Approved to Confer CCB Degrees	Number of Approved CCB Degree Prograr
Oregon	2019	SB 3 - Authorization for the Bachelor's of Applied Science in Applied Baccalaureate (AB) programs, upon approval by the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC)	3	3
	2023	SB 253 - Authorization for community colleges to confer Bachelor of Science: Nursing (BSN) degree programs, upon approval by the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC)		
Washington	2005	HB 1794 - Authorization and funding for four colleges to pilot applied bachelor's degrees; pilot expanded to 7 colleges in 2008.	32	143
	2010	SB 6344 - Law lifts pilot designation and eliminates cap on BAS degree programs offered by Washington colleges. Both the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) and Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) are designated to approve applied bachelor's degrees.		
	2012	HB 2483 - Pursuant to the state's elimination of the HECB, the SBCTC is granted applied bachelor's program approval authority and specified requirements to assess academic attainment by diverse student populations.		
	2016	SB 5928 - Subject to SBCTC approval, Bellevue College can develop and confer bachelor's of science (BS) degrees in computer science, given there is no program duplication in the geographic area or a shortage of programs demanded by industry and the workforce.		
	2021	SB 5401 - Any community and technical college in Washington can confer BS degrees in computer science, subject to approval of the SBCTC.		

Figure 1. The Level of Importance Ratings by Oregon and Washington Survey Respondents Concerning Establishing a Common Set of Quality Elements for CCB Degree Programs



Considerations for Quality in Washington CCB Degree Programs

Despite the state's long history with CCB degrees, there is considerable variation in experience among state and local leaders with planning and implementing these degrees. This varied experience extends to differences in understanding of CCB degree programs within specific college contexts. Whereas Washington leaders think common quality elements are potentially important to the continued adoption and scale-up of CCB degree programs, they seem to hold varying views on why these elements are needed and how exactly they would be integrated into state and local policies. For example, while the general idea of a common set of quality elements does not appear to be controversial, we observed different perspectives on to whom the quality elements would apply and how they would be used. Some practitioners thought new CCB programs would benefit more from a quality framework than more established programs.

We also observed concern about how a set of common quality elements would be used by state and local colleges. For example, some questioned if the intent of a framework on quality CCB degrees is to regulate program expansion in the state or if it is more focused on encouraging self-assessment for local decision-making about new programs. Some wondered if continuous improvement of maturing CCB programs was a major goal.

Ultimately, what role should a quality framework play at the state and institutional level to scale up new CCB programs and sustain (or sunset) maturing ones? Evaluation data are needed to answer these questions, yet Washington study participants rated the quality element on program evaluation as one of the lowest in importance of all nine elements. Possibly, acceptance of CCB degrees in a state as mature as Washington dampens interest in evaluation. Alternatively, perhaps practitioners were cautious to take on the additional responsibility of evaluating programs, given their current capacity.

Washington participants also raised the question of whether quality elements should vary depending on the occupational program and degree focus, such as bachelor of applied science versus bachelor of science, which could introduce more complexity into the ways CCB programs are approved in the future. It seems our study involving the BLC was timely in terms of examining college leader reactions to the CCB quality elements and considering how they may be represented in Washington's processes for approving and sustaining CCB programs.

Another important focus of Washington community and technical colleges is a commitment to closing equity gaps in education and employment outcomes between historically minoritized populations and majority student groups. This priority was clear in the survey and focus group data, where 72 percent of respondents say equitable access and outcomes are extremely important to CCB program quality. Six respondents mentioned some form of equitable student access and outcomes in offering two or three words or short phrases representing what quality CCB degrees mean to them, as is exemplified in this statement: "Equitable access and support to prepare for advanced positions and careers in the workforce."

Washington participants also highlighted the need to consider integrating CCBs into the overall functions of the state's community and technical colleges. Participants in the BLC group shared that some CCB programs are seen as "boutique programs" in terms of being designed to meet specific needs of the workforce and/or student groups. These forms of specificity may influence CCB programs to operate separately from the rest of the community college curriculum, even when the bachelor's degree operates as a capstone to an existing career pathway. Some BLC leaders asserted that the CCB quality framework should not further isolate these degree programs from the rest of the community college curriculum. More efforts to integrate CCB programs, including seeing how CCB quality elements can and should be integrated with other community college curriculum, was an important perspective of several Washington participants. It is also possible that integrating bachelor's degrees within the curriculum will help realize cost efficiencies that keep CCB degrees affordable for students who would otherwise struggle to afford bachelor's degrees.

Finally, Washington participants expressed interest in considering how quality elements may help to determine program viability, or sustainability, over time, aligning this concern with Century's and Christina and Nicholson-Goodman's emphasis on sustainability. Considering that some BAS and BSN programs have operated for a decade or more in Washington, it makes sense to increase the priority placed on assessing how these programs are functioning over time and assessing program and student outcomes, with an eye toward continuous improvement.

Considerations for Quality in Oregon CCB Degree Programs

As stated, Oregon is in a notably different position than Washington on the continuum of scaling CCBs, having passed CCB-authorizing legislation as recently as 2019. As of 2024, Oregon has three colleges conferring Bachelor's of Applied Science in Applied Baccalaureate (AB) programs. As Oregon sets out on its CCB journey, it has varying considerations of quality that are unique to this state's level of CCB scale.

Similar to Washington, participants from Oregon did not question the importance of quality in CCBs. However, they expressed caution toward codified elements of quality, their implications, and their use, particularly as a newly-conferring state. For instance, participants questioned why CCB degrees might develop and employ elements of quality that differ from approval processes for similar programs proposed by their university counterparts. They wondered if developing quality elements specific to CCB degree programs is akin to operating from a deficit mindset, illustrating a need to prove that CCBs are just as good as university baccalaureate degrees.

We also heard concerns that adding measures of quality for CCBs specifically would add to the resistance from universities – an additional aspect to measure CCBs against. Such concerns make sense considering Oregon's level of scale, noting only three of the state's 17 community colleges have been approved to confer CCB degrees thus far. As leaders in this state work to adopt and scale CCBs to other community colleges and more applied programs, it makes sense that they may be particularly circumspect about how changes to CCB case-making, including adopting a new quality framework, would be greeted by universities and other stakeholders in the state.

Whereas Oregon participants resoundingly support quality in CCBs, according to the survey results, some raised questions of how quality elements may differ from, compete with, or be redundant to regional accreditation and the state's current CCB program approval processes. They shared that they already have a form of quality standards through CTE and the Oregon State Board of Nursing and expressed concern for redundancy and confusion among these various processes. That said, they shared ways in which elements of CCB quality could be helpful. One participant posited that perhaps quality elements could be used to update outdated standards, and another ventured that perhaps these various forms of quality standards could be combined into one unified set of standards or elements applicable to BAS degrees offered by any higher education institution in the state, not just the community colleges. Some shared that elements of quality could help create greater consistency across programs and institutions, which would help them in comparing program quality and outcomes.

Oregon participants stressed the importance of sustainability and support for codified elements of quality, which corroborates Christina and Nicholson-Goodman's (2005) third dimension of scale. Participants shared that elements of quality need to include a level of stability in their use – that the elements must be supported by leadership, implemented by faculty and staff, and sustained over time. There was fear that a codified list of quality elements would be just another "new thing" that would go away over time. They especially shared this concern for rural-serving community colleges, who may not have the same resources to (a) measure up to the same standards of quality as their more populated counterparts and/or (b) sustain efforts in quality over time. As newer adopters of CCBs, it makes sense for Oregon to desire stability in their early efforts, particularly as it relates to equity in access across the more rural parts of the state. Building elements of quality that are sustainable across space and time could help community college leaders and practitioners make the case for the need and positive impact of CCBs as a higher education innovation. Also, greater sustainability in quality may help to build the case for scale in newer adopting states like Oregon.

Participants also shared that some institutions lack the data needed to sufficiently compare quality across programs, institutions, and states. Collecting relevant data seemed to be viewed as a precondition to quality, especially as a newer adopting state. One participant shared: "Before we try to define quality, we [need to acknowledge we] have no data tracking systems set up that are consistent [across institutions]." Some worried they might not be asking the right questions, requesting the right feedback, or assessing the right things to help them understand quality now and down the road, given their relative newness to CCB degree offerings.

They also wondered what data different states and institutions are collecting and questioned whether not having this information might make scaling up CCB program evaluation difficult on a broader scale. Their solution was to encourage consensus around data within and across states to build data systems that allow for assessing outcomes over time.

With this in mind, a participant suggested that an evaluative component be added to each element of quality, pushing practitioners and leaders to consider how they are evaluating the various elements of quality individually and collectively. One respondent suggested that evaluation is not an element in itself but rather a part of every element of quality, reinforcing a point made by Washington's BLC participants who wanted to see the CCB quality elements better integrated with one another. In this regard, the survey item on evaluation had lower respondent ratings in the survey, perhaps because respondents saw the importance of evaluation across the other eight elements.

Profoundly, and similar to Washington, Oregon participants mentioned that evaluation and quality look different at different stages, pointing out differences between quality at a developmental stage of a CCB than quality for existing programs. In this sense, quality is contextual to particular states and their level of scale across programs and institutions. Recognizing that CCB degree programs are so new in Oregon, participants were eager to engage in a conversation about data needed to evaluate program quality and also to consider how the sustainability of CCB degree programs may be enhanced if a continuous improvement approach were to be adopted at this early stage.

Finally, Oregon has work already underway that aligns with elements of quality for CCB degree programs. For instance, several focus group participants mentioned that relationships with industry are a priority in Oregon – that "industry is key in everything that we do." They also mentioned student services are important to how they consider quality. Additionally, they shared that a lot of their focus in CCBs is from a curricular perspective and that, so far, "deep dives have been on curriculum; the bigger question in the room is always around curriculum." Last, they cited that one of their three approved programs is on cybersecurity, and this program is designed with equity in access and flexibility in mind. These items – industry partnerships, student services, curriculum and learning, equitable access, and flexibility – are all reflected in the nine elements of CCB program quality developed by CCBA. This focus on quality elements is also reflected in our survey data; all Oregon respondents gave high ratings to the nine elements, indicating that quality matters in these specific ways.

Takeaways

1 Importance of Elements of Quality and Context

Across the conversations, observations, and survey data, there is no doubt in Washington or Oregon that CCB degree program quality is important. Further, even though the two states differ substantially in their adoption and scale-up of CCB degrees, participants from both states largely agree that the nine elements of quality are important to consider in designing CCB degree programs. Across both groups, CCB degrees were viewed as student-centered and employment-directed, focusing on meeting regional economic and community development needs.

Focus group participants from the two states also highlight the importance of sustainability, with participants keenly aware of the need to consider quality as part of sustaining viable programs. Some participants from both states recommended additional resources to ensure the long-term success of their CCB programs. They understood the importance of ensuring access and affordability for students who seek CCB degrees to prepare for careers that bring economic stability to their lives and contribute to the well-being of their communities. These college leaders believe CCB degrees are worthy of state and local investment.

That said, there is varying concern over how elements of quality will be used. It is not surprising that Washington and Oregon have differing concerns, considering the differences in their approach to and history with CCBs. Washington is much further scaled – being one of only a few states with CCBs authorized at every community and technical college – compared to Oregon, which is relatively new to authorizing CCBs at three institutions. Based on the experience of Washington and Oregon, where states are in their evolution of scaling CCB degree programs affect their views on quality, including how a framework makes sense for adopting and sustaining CCB programs.

Oregon represents the majority of CCB-authorizing states across the country, and we posit that other states developmentally closer to Oregon may hold perspectives closer to Oregon than to Washington. As a result, we advise that the development of quality elements pertaining to CCB degree programs take scale into account. The dual importance of scaling up and sustaining quality CCB degree programs needs to be considered from the start. Understanding the context with which states and institutions are engaging with CCB degree programs as an educational innovation matters a great deal.

2 Data

In addition, study participants from both states recognized the importance of data, including missing data, in efforts to create and deploy a quality framework for CCB degree programs. They noted their own states had limitations in data collection and accessibility pertaining to CCB degrees, although Washington's longevity has given them time to implement a more substantial data system. Resources will be necessary to engage in this type of data collection without adding to the workload of the practitioners who lead these programs.

More research is needed to understand the data needed to evaluate quality at every stage of CCB program adoption and implementation, including what quality means for the long-term sustainability of these degrees. From our perspective, combining state data systems with measures of local CCB degree program quality would help to more fully tell the story of how CCB degrees work and who they work for. Research on student access and outcomes from a mature state like Washington may also pique the interest of states that do not yet confer CCB degrees, furthering scale-up in the country.

3 Coordinating Scale

Finally, we observe there has to date been little effort to coordinate CCB policy adoption and scale-up across states. CCB degrees have been adopted one state at a time, sometimes with sharing of information and insights among professionals across state lines but sometimes operating almost entirely on their own. To this point, we have not seen two states attempt to intentionally adopt CCB degrees in a coordinated fashion and specific window of time, let alone observed strategic regional or national pursuit of CCB degrees. When considering opportunities to scale up CCB degrees, coordination across state lines might lead to shared learning that could help address gaps in baccalaureate attainment in CCB-leading and lagging states. Being able to thoughtfully compare how CCB degree program adoption takes place over time in multiple states could also help inform future decisions about program quality. If CCB degrees are associated with positive outcomes, as practitioners and a growing body of research seem to show is occurring (see, for example, Meza & Love, 2023; Pawlicki et al., 2023), it will be increasingly important to ensure that more states know how to strategically scale up and sustain quality CCB degrees.

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