

The State Leadership Playbook for Planning and Implementing CCB Degree Programs:

An Introduction

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About This Brief

Bachelor's degrees serve as a primary pathway to the middle class in the United States, but they remain out of reach for many, especially adult and working learners. While community colleges often provide a pathway back to education for working adults, most of these institutions aren’t allowed to offer bachelor’s degrees.

But in 24 states, the story is different — these states authorize the community college baccalaureate degree. A community college baccalaureate (CCB) is a bachelor's degree offered by a predominantly associate degree-granting institution focused on applied, career-specific fields, providing student-centered, affordable pathways to higher-paying career advancement.

States play a central role in expanding CCB authorization, and state leaders who seek guidance in supporting CCB degrees need evidence-based information to support authorization and advance implementation.

With the support of Strada Education Foundation, we are filling that gap by writing this playbook for state leaders. Powered by research and informed by experience, this playbook provides a guide for state leaders to effectively plan and implement CCB degrees that are affordable, equitable, data-driven, and sustainable. It includes a coherent policy brief series and a modular set of research-informed resources that provide long-term support to those working to authorize and implement these degrees, helping state leaders deliver on the promise of the community college baccalaureate degree.

Bachelor's Degrees: A Pathway to the Middle Class

For decades, earning a bachelor's degree has served as a primary pathway to the middle class in the United States. Bachelor's degrees matter for communities, state and regional economies, and workforce competitiveness.

Research finds that roughly 66% of good jobs (i.e., those paying middle-class wages) in the U.S. will be held by workers with a bachelor's degree by 2031 (Strohl et al., 2024). Workers with a bachelor's degree earn about 70% more annually than those with only a high school diploma and have significantly lower unemployment rates (Morris, et al., 2025). College graduates spend more, pay more in taxes, help attract business investment, build social capital, and impact their communities in ways that reinforce regional growth, employment, and quality of life (Orrell & Veldran, 2024).

These benefits extend well beyond earnings. College graduates lead healthier lifestyles (Reardon et al., 2022) and have better physical health than those who did not obtain a bachelor's degree (Bolz et al., 2024). They own homes (Silles, 2023), volunteer in their communities (Gallup and Lumina Foundation, 2023), and spend more time with their children (Guryan et al., 2008).

Finally, individuals with bachelor's degrees are more likely to participate in democratic processes than those without a college degree. College-educated Americans are about 50% more likely to vote than those whose education ended with high school, and earning a bachelor's degree is associated with higher levels of civic and political engagement (Ahearn et al., 2022).

66%

66% percent of good jobs (i.e., those paying middle-class wages) in the U.S. will be held by workers with a bachelor's degree by 2031.

70%

Workers with a bachelor's degree earn about 70% more annually than those with only a high school diploma.

50%

College-educated Americans are about 50% more likely to vote than those whose education ended with high school.

The Challenge

Despite the promise, bachelor's degrees remain out of reach for many. Numerous states and communities face persistent gaps in bachelor's-level attainment, limiting their ability to meet employer demand and build strong communities. And many students who want to earn a bachelor's degree are stymied by cost, geographic access, and other barriers.

Expanding access and opportunity to the bachelor's degree is not just an education priority; it is a core strategy that allows communities to thrive, helps employers find, retain, and promote local talent, and expands pathways to upward mobility and the myriad benefits of the bachelor's degree for students and their families.

37 million

Over 37 million working age adults have attained some college credit but no degree, and that population is growing.

The Benefits — and Limitations — of Community Colleges

Across the country, there are millions of underserved students and adult learners who want to earn a bachelor's degree tied to good jobs but never reach that goal. Over 37 million working age adults have attained some college credit but no degree, and that population is growing (National Student Clearinghouse, 2025).

And while the exigence for accessible and available pathways is clear, higher-education structures often fall short. Many programs are too expensive, geographically out of reach, logistically prohibitive to regular attendance, unavailable, or simply not designed for today's students, including working adults.

Community colleges provide a pathway back to education for working adults.

Community colleges can offer a different approach. They often provide a pathway back to education for working adults (American Association of Community Colleges, 2026), cultivating a welcome environment where adult learners feel a sense of belonging (Martinez & Munsch, 2019).

However, community college students face a structural barrier when they aspire to the bachelor's degree: Most community colleges aren't allowed to offer bachelor's degrees, even when they offer associate programs. The structure of community colleges developed in the 1960s — that is, sending community college graduates to work or requiring them to transfer to another institution — leaves a big gap for the countless learners who want or need more than an associate degree to obtain a good job and who are not well served by existing transfer pathways. Such students would benefit a great deal from a bachelor's degree option offered at their local community college.

The Promise of Community College Bachelor's Degrees

Twenty-four states are meeting this need and changing the story. These 24 states authorize the community college baccalaureate degree (Meza & Vo, 2026).

A community college baccalaureate (CCB) is a ***bachelor's degree offered by a predominantly associate degree-granting institution focused on applied, career-specific fields like business, healthcare, nursing, and technology, providing student-centered, affordable pathways to higher-paying career advancement.***

CCB degrees are specifically designed to address the needs of adult and working learners, allowing them to stay in their communities to complete a bachelor's degree.

24
states

24 states authorize the community college baccalaureate degree.

A community college baccalaureate (CCB) is a bachelor's degree offered by a predominantly associate degree-granting institution focused on applied, career-specific fields, providing student-centered, affordable pathways to higher-paying career advancement.

Our research team has spent many years working directly with community college practitioners engaged in the design and implementation of community college baccalaureate programs. Alongside other scholars and practitioners, we have contributed substantially to the growing knowledge base surrounding these degrees. While much of their impact is still emerging and requires further study, a growing body of evidence provides an increasingly clear and compelling picture of how the CCB degree benefits community college learners:

- Community college baccalaureate programs are expanding access to bachelor's degrees (Cuellar & Gandara, 2021; Meza & Love, 2023; Rios-Aquilar, et al., 2025);
- CCBs are more affordable than traditional bachelor's degree programs offered at public and private institutions (Meza & Pawlicki, 2025);
- CCBs lead to high completion rates comparable to transfer students (Meza, 2024); and
- CCBs demonstrate employment and wage gains for graduates (Acton et al., 2026; Meza & Bragg, 2022; Meza & Bragg 2025).

The Playbook

States play a central role in expanding CCB authorization, and state leaders need evidence-based information to support their efforts.

Students, employers, community members, and leaders who seek opportunities for their local community colleges to confer bachelor's degrees should be able to do so, but they can't do it alone. States play a central role in expanding CCB authorization, and state leaders who seek guidance in supporting CCB degrees need evidence-based information to support authorization and advance implementation.

With the support of Strada Education Foundation, we are filling that gap by writing a playbook for state leaders: ***A State Leadership Playbook for Planning and Implementing Community College Baccalaureate Degree Programs.***

Powered by research and informed by practitioner experience, this playbook provides a guide for state leaders to effectively plan and implement community college baccalaureate degrees that are affordable, equitable, data-driven, and sustainable. It includes a coherent policy brief series and a modular set of research-informed resources that can be used by CCB stakeholders for long-term support to authorize and implement CCB degrees.

A Playbook Informed by Experience

In addition to research-based reports and papers, we developed this playbook through the rich expertise documented during our interviews with state and college leaders, along with the knowledge tapped from our two advisory groups, one of state leaders from 10 states, and another of nationally-recognized researchers who study CCBs and related policy concerns. We also conducted a survey of state leaders at the annual Community College Baccalaureate Association (CCBA) conference in February 2026, inviting leaders to share topics they believe to be important in developing, implementing, and sustaining high quality CCB degrees in their states. These interviews, advisory groups, and surveys enabled us to integrate real-world insights into the playbook, ensuring that it reflects the knowledge and perspectives of the people who know CCBs well.

Taking these insights into account, we curated the contents of this playbook, breaking down key CCB research and strategy across eight briefs:

- **CCB Facts, Figures, and the National Landscape**
- **State Legislation and Policy**
- **Students and Equitable Pathways**
- **Program Approval**
- **Affordability and Time to Degree**
- **Geographic Access**
- **Student Labor Market Outcomes and Workforce and Economic Development**
- **Social Impact on Communities and Graduates**

Over the coming months, we will release these briefs, culminating at the end of 2026 in an actionable playbook, informed by research and practice, that helps state leaders deliver on the promise of the community college baccalaureate degree. ■

About the Authors



Dr. Elizabeth Meza is a distinguished researcher and faculty instructor at the Evans School of Public Policy at the University of Washington and a UW Public Impact Research Fellow. She is also a New America Education Policy Program Fellow for Community Colleges. A former community college faculty member and administrator, Elizabeth regularly publishes and speaks on community college baccalaureate degrees and STEM transfer education. Dr. Meza's research agenda seeks to identify and address inequities that hinder American higher education from delivering on its promise of equity for all students, and centers community colleges as engines for opportunity and workforce development. Elizabeth earned a Ph.D. from the University of Washington and a M.S. degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



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