

Baccalaureate Education in the Community College Setting

*The Higher Learning Commission
North Central Association of Colleges and Schools*

Task Force Executive Summary with Recommendations February 23, 2001

BACKGROUND

In August 1998, the Executive Director of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (after January 1, 2001, The Higher Learning Commission) presented to the Board of Trustees the first institutional request from a community college to have its accreditation extended to a few competency-based programs leading to a Bachelor of Applied Technology. Because of the precedent-setting nature of this request, the Board decided to follow a unique course of action:

- It created a special team to monitor the development and delivery of the first competency degree program (with the team conducting periodic advisory visits) and postponed a decision on extending accreditation to the new baccalaureate program. At the end of the fourth year, after the graduation of the first cohort of students, the Board will consider the institution's request.
- It called for the establishment of this Task Force to study the changing contexts of baccalaureate education in the community college setting. It charged the Task Force “to study the various ways in which quality baccalaureate education is currently provided in community college settings, to study the forces behind extending the community college mission to include the offering of baccalaureate education, and to recommend to the Commission the most appropriate and most effective strategy(ies) to follow in extending accreditation to baccalaureate education in community college settings.”

TASK FORCE ON BACCALAUREATE EDUCATION IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SETTING

The membership of the Task Force reflected the Board's fundamental expectation of all task forces. Namely, the members represented a variety of institutions, including community colleges and baccalaureate degree granting institutions, private as well as public institutions. Faculty and chief administrative officers served. At least one participant had previous legislative experience. One member was a state higher education executive officer. Three members came from outside the region, two representing specific national organizations (American Association of Community Colleges and Association of American Colleges and Universities) and one coming from another regional accrediting association. One public member participated. These members together with the Commission's Executive Director and an Associate Director/Institutional Liaison participated in a tightly-structured intensive process facilitated by a highly experienced person familiar with the community colleges and with the Commission.

DELIBERATIONS OF THE TASK FORCE

Comprehensive community colleges constitute one-third of the institutions holding affiliation with the Commission. Because of their community-based missions, they have proven to be exceptionally adept at understanding the higher education needs of the communities they serve and responding with the creation of a rich variety of degrees, certificates, and credit and non-credit courses. They are serving as a major point of access to higher education for all types of students. Through hosting of "2+2" programs and sponsoring or participating in higher education centers, community colleges have worked—and continue to work—to make baccalaureate education accessible. By providing two year programs that articulate almost seamlessly into baccalaureate programs offered by other institutions, community colleges have also made baccalaureate education more affordable for many students. If all of these extraordinary assets would be placed in jeopardy by the extension of the accreditation of community colleges to include some baccalaureate offerings, then the Commission would be wise in granting that extension very infrequently if at all.

Mindful of the Commission's recently-adopted mission statement—"Serving the common good by assuring and advancing the quality of higher learning"—the Task Force studied the various contexts in which baccalaureate education is and can be offered on community college campuses and in higher education centers. The Task Force focused on three primary models: (1) "2+2" programs where baccalaureate institutions offer on a community college campus one or more culminating years of the baccalaureate degree; (2) higher education centers where community colleges collaborate with baccalaureate institutions in developing and offering baccalaureate degrees; and (3) community colleges that offer the total baccalaureate degree program.

The Task Force concluded that accreditation standards and processes must expect all institutions providing baccalaureate education in a community college setting to weigh the offering against institutional mission and values, including an institutional commitment to enhance access. Those standards and processes also must allow for the evaluation of institutional capacity to assure academic quality, program integrity, adequate resource support, and effective governance and oversight. Moreover, standards and processes need to be flexible enough to accommodate rapid change and to allow the Commission to be responsive to unique institutional circumstances as well as open to creative partnerships between and among educational organizations.

The Task Force engaged in significant discussions about the purpose and content of baccalaureate education, specifically the new "applied" or competency-based baccalaureate degrees. Many institutions are responding to the changing role of baccalaureate education in the new economic marketplace, particularly studying how best to balance the values of the academy with changing needs of students and the communities in which they live and work. Community colleges are not alone in proposing alternative approaches to baccalaureate education, for existing baccalaureate degree granting institutions have and are creating new types of baccalaureate programs, including but not limited to the Bachelor's in Applied Science (B.A.S.) and the Bachelor's in Applied Technology (B.A.T.). The Task Force concluded that the academy will be well-served by several current national projects focused on the content and structure of baccalaureate education, on the role of general education in the degree, and on the

balance between applied and theoretical learning that should be achieved in sound baccalaureate education.

The four recommendations that follow are grounded in a consensus of the Task Force on these expectations:

- (a) General education must remain central to baccalaureate education even if its well-defined functional competencies might be gained through contextual learning techniques instead of traditional courses.
- (b) The academy should expect that baccalaureate education have durability and flexibility that supports life-long learning. In short, applied baccalaureate education is not terminal.
- (c) The central role of the faculty in curriculum design should be protected, as well as the fundamental commitment to freedom of academic inquiry. Faculty, however, should design curricula that respond to the needs of the communities and students they serve.
- (d) Accountability to external constituencies and assessment of achieved learning hold for all baccalaureate curricula, whether applied or traditional.
- (e) The offerings of a small number of baccalaureate degrees can be done by a community college without its abdication of the mission to serve a community with a rich variety of certificate and associate degree programs.
- (f) Through accrediting policies and careful attention to its procedures, the Commission can respond appropriately to a community college wishing to enhance its service to the community through the addition of a small number of baccalaureate degrees to its program offerings.
- (g) Competent peer review in these settings will require well-selected and trained evaluators.
- (h) By developing and disseminating guidelines and good practices, the Commission can contribute to the quality of all baccalaureate offerings in community college settings.

The full Task Force report explains in significant detail the depth and breadth of the Task Force's discussions.

FORMAL TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION ONE: The Task Force recommends that the Commission, through its current institutional change processes, consider requests from a community college to offer some programs leading to baccalaureate degrees. In making the recommendation, the Task Force also expects that the Commission will assure that accreditation policies and processes measure an institution against its stated mission.

In making this recommendation, the Task Force concluded that the offering of a small number of baccalaureate degrees should not automatically negate the mission-driven culture of a community college heavily invested in delivering two year programs. Moreover, the Commission has precedent it can follow. It can treat such changes in ways similar to those it currently uses in extending accreditation of baccalaureate institutions to include a limited number of graduate programs. That is, the Commission expects that the request follows the Commission's protocols for requesting approval of institutional change, including the provision of a needs analysis that establishes the program's response to a clear unmet market. Moreover, the Commission in extending accreditation to the higher degree level often restricts it to a specific program or to a limited number of specific programs. At some point, if the institution is

actually transforming into a baccalaureate institution, it will need to seek recognition of the changed institutional status and its maturity in assuring quality in baccalaureate education generally.

RECOMMENDATION TWO: The Task Force recommends that in evaluating the request of a community college to offer baccalaureate education, the Commission apply established criteria, requirements, and expectations for general education, institutional capacity, commitment of resources, and assessment of achieved student learning for the baccalaureate program.

All accrediting decisions should be informed by the expectation that the institution's integrity demands that its baccalaureate program(s) be as effective as those provided by baccalaureate institutions. While being open to new approaches to providing general education and evaluating its effectiveness on student learning, the Commission should expect that the baccalaureate degrees offered by the community college lead to the same competencies expected of students enrolled in similar degrees in other settings. Moreover, the Commission should expect a community college to have the capacity—including financial commitment, qualified faculty, effective student services, and access to adequate learning resources—to ensure the effectiveness of the baccalaureate degree program(s) and the learning of students enrolled in them. The institution's program of measuring student learning should be extended to include the new baccalaureate program(s).

RECOMMENDATION THREE: The Task Force recommends that the Commission develop guidelines and good practices for unique institutional situations to inform institutional decision-making and team evaluations.

Guidelines help institutions measure their capacity to deliver baccalaureate education in community college settings, whether they be baccalaureate institutions providing “+2” offerings on community college campuses or community colleges offering their own baccalaureate programs. Guidelines should be written to inform and facilitate responsiveness to change, not to stifle it. Moreover, in the hands of trained Commission evaluators these guidelines should be perceived as useful tools to inform the application of existing criteria and requirements, not as an independent set of criteria, requirements, or standards.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR: The Task Force suggests that the Commission consider developing a third-party, quality review program appropriate for higher education centers.

Although the Task Force's focus was largely on community colleges intending to offer baccalaureate education, some members concluded that multi-institutional higher education centers present a unique opportunity for the Commission. If non-degree granting higher education centers want some form of Commission recognition, then the Commission might wish to provide for them a new certification program related to but not equivalent to accreditation. Such a program might, among other matters, address how centers can honor the academic integrity of each participating institution.

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