Governor Signs Bill Enabling 15 California Community Colleges to Award Four-Year Degrees

California joins 21 other states that offer community college baccalaureates in workforce and technical fields

Governor Jerry Brown today signed into law a historic measure that for the first time enables a limited number of California community colleges to offer four-year degrees.

Senate Bill (SB) 850, authored by State Senator Marty Block (D-San Diego), drew overwhelming bipartisan and business support because it addresses a growing need for the state to become more competitive in areas of high workforce demand.

The pilot program authorized under SB 850 allows up to 15 different community college districts to offer one baccalaureate degree each in select workforce majors starting on Jan. 1, 2015 and ending on July 1, 2023.

SB 850 stipulates that the four-year programs offered may not duplicate any currently available at the University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU). Regardless, the bill represents one of the most significant changes in the California Master Plan for Higher Education since its adoption in 1960. Until now, only the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems could offer public, four-year degrees.

San Diego Community College District Chancellor Constance M. Carroll served on the state’s baccalaureate study group and has chaired the statewide coalition that provided advocacy for the passage of SB 850.
“Our entire coalition of supporters is delighted by this good news,” said Carroll. “It is imperative for community colleges to ensure that students are well prepared and competitive for the many jobs and careers that now require bachelor’s degrees as entry-level preparation. Education for the workforce is one of the top community college missions and, thanks to Senator Block and Governor Brown, we have an important new pathway for that mission.”

Chancellor Carroll says programs which might be offered include dental hygiene, radiologic technology, health information science/infomatics, and automotive technology. She says some of the new four-year programs could be offered as early as the fall 2015 semester. Students enrolled in upper-division coursework will pay an additional $84 per unit fee – which is still less than fees paid by CSU students.

First, however, community college districts interested in offering baccalaureate programs will be submitting proposals to the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. Selected programs will then be accredited by Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC). In anticipation of the bill being signed, many college districts have already begun planning and budgeting for the new programs.

“This is landmark legislation that is a game changer for California’s higher education system and our workforce preparedness,” Senator Marty Block (SD-39) said. “SB 850 boosts the focus of our community colleges on job training and increasing the accessibility and affordability of our state’s higher education system.”

California now joins 21 other states that allow community colleges to offer four-year degrees. Increasingly, community college graduates are finding that professions that once required a certificate or an associate degree now require baccalaureate-level preparation as a prerequisite for hiring. With the state’s public universities either being too crowded or failing to offer bachelor’s degrees in these fields, many students are being challenged in trying to secure the education they need.

Meanwhile, demand for graduates with bachelor’s degrees is increasing. In California, several studies have found that the state needs to produce 60,000 more graduates each year by 2025 to meet employer demands. One study, by the Public Policy Institute of California, concluded that 41 percent of jobs in the state will require a bachelor’s degree, but just 35 percent of working-age adults will have one.

SB 850 has enjoyed considerable support since it was introduced in January. Over the summer, it was passed with unanimous votes in both the California Senate and Assembly. The bill is backed by an array of business groups, veterans organizations, the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office and the CSU system.

As the second-largest of California’s 72 community college districts, the San Diego Community College District serves approximately 100,000 students annually through three two-year colleges and San Diego Continuing Education. The three colleges, San Diego City College, San Diego Mesa College, and San Diego Miramar College, offer associate degrees and certificates
in occupational programs that prepare students for transfer to four-year colleges and entry-level jobs.

Photos: Sen. Marty Block and SDCCD Chancellor Constance M. Carroll with SB 850 supporters at a Sept. 4 news conference in San Diego; San Diego Mesa College’s Allied Health Building where the SDCCD is proposing to establish a four-year degree program in health information management.