

The Community College Baccalaureate: Process and Politics

**By Linda M. Thor, Chancellor, Foothill-De Anza Community College District
and Chris Bustamante, President, Rio Salado College**

In most instances, obtaining authorization to offer the community college baccalaureate degree requires state legislative approval. When Rio Salado College challenged the status quo by seeking such approval from the Arizona State Legislature, a political firestorm erupted over issues of mission, need and cost. A heated battle ensued between this public Maricopa Community College and several of its public and private university competitors. The controversial issue was played out through legislative hearings, in the media, and behind the scenes for the next eight years. Although the legislative effort was ultimately unsuccessful, the goal of increased access has progressed in Arizona as a result of bringing attention to the need for more baccalaureate options and pathways. In this chapter, Rio Salado's experience will be presented as a case study along with strategies and lessons learned.

The origins of Rio Salado College's attempt to gain approval for the community college baccalaureate can be traced to the State of Arizona's legislative session beginning in January 1997. At the time, Linda Thor and Chris Bustamante were serving, respectively, as president of Rio Salado College and as a seasoned lobbyist for the Maricopa Community College District, the largest district of its type in the nation in terms of headcount.

Before proceeding with the specifics of the battle for the baccalaureate, it is worthwhile to review the statewide catalysts that led to the call for higher education change and to note the political climate of those times.

Arizona's Catalysts for Change

For decades, Arizona has ranked as one of the nation's top five fastest growing states, with a rapidly decreasing median age. According to U.S. Census data, between 1990 and 2000 Arizona's population grew from 3,665,228 to 5,130,632, the 5th-largest increase and 2nd-largest percentage gain (40%) among the 50 states. In spite of this soaring growth, during the 1990s the state had fewer higher educational options per capita than comparably sized states.

In addition to the community college system, the public higher education system was built around three state universities—Arizona State University (ASU) in Tempe, a suburb of Phoenix; University of Arizona (UA) in Tucson; and Northern Arizona University (NAU) in Flagstaff. The courses and degree programs at these institutions were still targeted largely at the 18 to 25-year-old population. There were limited evening and weekend classes. This was inadequate to address the specific needs of working adults, namely: rotating work schedules; commuting; juggling work, home and studies; and the need to constantly upgrade professional knowledge. However, Arizona's extensive rural populations were only accommodated by public university extension centers or distance learning. The smaller private universities that did exist tended to be highly specialized, such as Embry Riddle Aeronautical University in the Prescott area, or they were branches of

institutions headquartered elsewhere, such as Ottawa University. The exception, of course, is the mega University of Phoenix (UOP).

In contrast, there were 19 Arizona community colleges. Collectively they served in excess of 200,000 students—more than the public universities combined. However, Arizona's community colleges did and still do receive significantly less state funding per student than the three state universities. They were and are primarily funded through property-tax revenue and tuition. At approximately \$450 a semester for a full-time student, tuition in 1997 was just over half that of the state universities. In recent years, the community colleges have faced record student-enrollment increases. The largest district in the state is the Maricopa Community Colleges, with its 10 colleges: Chandler-Gilbert, Estrella Mountain, Gateway, Glendale, Mesa, Paradise Valley, Phoenix, Rio Salado, Scottsdale, and South Mountain. Arizona's rural colleges are Arizona Western, Central Arizona, Cochise, Coconino, Eastern, Mohave, Northland Pioneer, Pima, and Yavapai.

As is true today, the line between two-year and four-year colleges had become increasingly blurred. Nationally, studies indicated that on average it took a student up to four years to earn a so-called “two year” degree and up to seven years to earn a “four year” or bachelor's degree. The reasons varied. As tuition increased, students found it necessary to limit course loads. And, as more adults entered the higher education system, they needed to balance work and family life with studies. Noting this trend, the *New York Times* stated, “In ways legislators in state capitols and in Washington are struggling to make sense of, the higher education mainstream is coming to look a lot more like Rio Salado and Maricopa than like Harvard or Yale.”¹

The 1997 Legislative Session: SB1109 Introduces a New Model of Higher Education

With all these catalysts in place, the time appeared right for introducing new models that would revolutionize access to higher education in Arizona. It was in this climate, just prior to the 1997 Arizona legislative session, that Carol Springer, a powerful Republican who served in the Arizona State Senate from 1990 to 1998, set the community college baccalaureate movement in motion. Sen. Springer was the Appropriations Chair, and this gave her a great vantage point from which to push for this change because she had great influence on the purse strings of the state's public universities and community colleges. Her constituents resided in the rural areas surrounding the town of Prescott, and she recognized their unmet education needs. Her initial bill was simply a request to appropriate \$940,000 to aid an existing cooperative program between Northern Arizona University and Yavapai College in Prescott.

Shortly thereafter, she approached the Maricopa Community Colleges with a broader plan: Senate Bill 1109, which would authorize the community college baccalaureate. She had learned of similar models across the nation and in surrounding states with rural populations, such as Utah and Nevada. Implementing such a change would require the legislature to delete just four words in the statute authorizing community colleges. The Maricopa Chancellor, Dr. Paul Elsner, was favorably

¹ Applebome, Peter. (August 3, 1997). Community Colleges at the Crossroads: Which Way Is Up? *The New York Times*, 4A, 24-26.

inclined. He was nationally acknowledged as a visionary throughout his lengthy career with the Maricopa Community Colleges. In assessing the legislation's potential for the state's community colleges, he realized that the one most likely to grasp the concept and successfully implement it in short order was the very non-traditional Rio Salado. The college was not restricted by the usual geographic service boundaries. Established in 1978 as a "college without walls," it was never intended to have a large physical campus. Rather it brought quality, flexible college courses to working adults utilizing distance learning formats and in-person programs at major employers and in community centers.

In early 1997, Rio Salado served some 34,000 students annually, making it the third largest in headcount of the 10 Maricopa Community Colleges. The 1996-97 academic year was a pivotal one for Rio Salado for several reasons. First, during that time Rio Salado became the first college or university in the Southwest to offer courses online, backed up by placing the college's entire student support services online as well. Immediately, student enrollment began to surge, with a corresponding increase in full time student equivalents (FTSE). Within the next 10 years online offerings would grow to more than 500 courses and more than 30,000 online students annually. The growth and popularity of online learning at Rio, combined with several highly innovative programs, qualified Rio Salado to be a major provider for the community college baccalaureate.

The Rio Salado College Applied Baccalaureate Model

One of the themes that we would stress in legislative testimonies over multiple years was that the community college baccalaureate was a model whose time had come. The concept proposed by Sen. Springer was an excellent fit for the non-traditional Rio Salado. First, its focus would be on applied programs rather than theory-based programs offered by universities. The designated programs would offer advanced education and technical skills for specialized employment in communities already served by the college, which enrolled students state-wide. The four applied career fields that were ultimately selected were public safety, allied health, computer technology and business. A few years later, teacher education would be added to the mix.

Secondly, the community college baccalaureate and Rio Salado were a perfect fit was that it would utilize Rio's expertise in distance learning formats to reach students unable to access baccalaureate degrees because of geographic barriers. This would keep local students residing as taxpayers within their own Arizona communities, saving them the cost of relocating or time-consuming commutes.

Next, the community college baccalaureate would not compete with state university programs for students. The legislation would permit these degrees only in select career fields and "workforce-related disciplines" where degrees were not currently offered by one of the state universities. In addition, the applied baccalaureate degrees offered and conferred through Rio Salado would be delivered with full articulation to Arizona's other community colleges. As an example, in 1997 there was no career pathway at the three state universities for public safety personnel through a Bachelor in Applied Science degree in either Public Safety or Police Science. Yet Rio Salado had already served more than 10,000 police and public safety officers over the course of the decade through specialized courses and its law enforcement technology program leading to the Associate

in Applied Science degree. A more highly educated police force would greatly benefit all Arizona communities. Several prominent chiefs within the police community would ultimately join forces with Rio Salado in the bid for the applied baccalaureate.

Another very appealing feature of the applied baccalaureate was that it would provide an alternative means to address workforce shortages. For example, there were documented shortages of highly qualified dental hygienists when the Arizona Dental Association (AzDA) approached Rio Salado for educational remedies back in the mid-1990s. With the financial support and long-term commitment of AzDA and its member dentists, the college opened the Rio Salado School of Dental Hygiene in 1998, offering an accelerated 15-month program leading to the Associate in Applied Science degree. Still there was no state-wide equivalent baccalaureate program for articulation.

The financial plan behind SB 1109 was that applied baccalaureate students would pay “university” tuition for upper division courses. A critical factor that would become a legislative point of contention was that no additional state funds would be required beyond those already allocated to the community colleges. In addition, supporters of the bill were emphatic that no additional faculty or physical facilities would be required. Instead, Rio Salado was highly qualified and fully prepared to offer distance learning options for applied baccalaureate programs, most notably through online learning. These formats would effectively utilize existing resources, both human and tangible.

The 1997 Legislative Arguments For and Against the Community College Baccalaureate

The need to approach the Arizona Legislature for a statute change was driven by the necessity to remove four simple words from the definition of community college. The definition would be amended as such: “ ‘Community college’ means an educational institution which is under the jurisdiction of the state board and which provides a program training in the arts, sciences, and humanities beyond the 12th grade of the public or private high school course of study of vocational education...”²

From the time it was introduced to legislators, Arizona’s version of the community college baccalaureate created a firestorm of controversy. We were called upon multiple times to testify on behalf of SB 1109. Our testimony made it clear that this bill would enable our community colleges to do what we do best: be fully responsive to the needs of working adults and their employers. The curriculum and degrees would be designed in close partnership with the community and local employers. Other “pro” lobbying arguments we presented included:

- The mission of community colleges would not change: we did not seek to become research institutions.
- Applied baccalaureates would be customized for adults in ways university programs were not.
- Industry experts with current market experience, as opposed to full-time research professors, would teach classes.

² State of Arizona. Text of Senate Bill 1109, 15-1401 (3). Forty-third Legislature: First Regular Session, 1997.

- Arizona’s public universities were overflowing with students and were reaching capacity.
- The universities had education “gaps” that community colleges could fill more cost-effectively.
- Community colleges have always been a much more cost-effective alternative when it comes to educating.
- Despite articulation agreements, students were often finding that their community college credits were not accepted at the state universities.
- Students would receive more choices for lower-cost options.
- The middle class was being squeezed out of the higher education system due to cost.
- Rural communities could “grow their own” if their residents received their education in their own back yard.
- Rural students and working adults would receive better and improved access.
- Mothers with children, mortgages and jobs needed more higher education options because they cannot simply “pick up” and go off somewhere else to finish their degrees.

The issue began to receive extensive local and eventually national media coverage. As then-president of Rio Salado, Linda Thor wrote a guest column for the *Arizona Republic* called “Workforce Needs Community College Baccalaureate Degree,”³ explaining how our curriculum and degrees are community-driven. On the positive side, *Tribune Newspapers*—the region’s second-largest circulation newspaper chain—ran an editorial that asked “Why didn’t somebody think of this before?”⁴ A *Tribune* guest commentary by Sam Steiger, a former five-term member of Congress, appeared with the headline “Universities Standing in Way of Progress to Protect Their Turf.” He wrote, “The simple truth is that the 43,000-student ASU is riddled with the tyranny of a few elitists who prefer to publish rather than teach. UA is equally dedicated to preserving and expanding its student population at the expense of teaching values.”⁵

The “con” arguments against the applied baccalaureate by the university lobbyists included:

- Mission erosion: that is, community colleges would depart from their core mission of providing low-cost associate degrees, workforce development, remedial and vocational education.
- Mission creep: once the community colleges received limited authority to grant applied baccalaureates, down the road they would want the same authority for academic programs.
- There was simply no need and no demand for the applied baccalaureate.
- There would be hidden costs and the Legislature would have to produce additional funding.
- It would lead to a three-tier system in which minorities and low-income students came out short.

³ Thor, Linda M. (April 3, 1997). Workforce Needs Community College Baccalaureate Degree. *The Arizona Republic*, B4.

⁴ Editorial Staff. (November 22, 1996). Expanding Community Colleges. *Tribune Newspapers*, A12.

⁵ Steiger, Sam. (February 18, 1997). Universities Standing in Way of Progress to Protect Their Turf. *Tribune Newspapers*, A9.

- Community colleges and their faculty members were not qualified to offer or teach baccalaureates classes.
- It would undercut the existing 2+2 programs between public universities and community colleges.
- It would lead to duplication of educational services that could lead to increased tuition.
- Physical expansion would be required.
- The universities had already greatly expanded their capacity to meet Arizona's needs.
- The change in higher education would be too radical.

Joining the university lobbyists in opposition was the head of the Arizona Tax Research Association (ATRA), an organization which has made it a perpetual mission to oppose every single tax increase in Arizona. It should be emphasized that although SB1109 specifically did not call for new taxes or state allocations, the ATRA representative claimed that would be an end result.

Midway through the 1997 legislative session, an editorial in *The Arizona Republic* was headlined "The Universities' Job" and declared "this well-meaning proposal is perilous for both the state's universities and its community colleges." The same article concluded the applied baccalaureate was "divisive and unneeded."⁶ At another point, Sen. Springer was quoted in *Tribune Newspapers* as saying her bill was causing "heartburn" for the universities.⁷

The Outcome of the 1997 Proposed Applied Baccalaureate Legislation

Nevertheless, SB 1109 was passed 22-8 by the Arizona Senate before its defeat in the House Education Committee. The final bullets were delivered in-person through appearances by the three public university presidents: Clara Lovett of NAU; Manuel Pacheco of UA and Lattie Coor of ASU. They argued that SB 1109 was well intentioned but misguided and needed much more study. Therefore, the House Education Committee complied by adopting an amendment to set up a committee to study the issue.⁸ It was well-known that then-Governor Fife Symington was squarely against the community college baccalaureate, and he vetoed the amended bill, stating it "represents a substantial departure from the existing structure of higher education in Arizona."⁹

Sen. Springer was equally outspoken. The *Arizona Republic* quoted her as saying, "This bill was absolutely not judged on its merits, period." She added that it was vetoed because the state's universities feared competition from community colleges.¹⁰

But the movement did not end there. The Legislature proceeded to form its own Higher Education Study Committee, with 13 members including Sen. Springer, representatives of major universities and the community colleges, the Arizona Board of Regents, the Arizona Community College

⁶ Editorial Staff. (March 19, 1997). Four-Year Degrees: The Universities' Job. *The Arizona Republic*, B6.

⁷ Noyes, Francie. (February 23, 1997). College Bill Debate Continues. *Tribune Newspapers*, A1.

⁸ Staff. (March 21, 1997). New Degrees for 2-Year Colleges Killed In House. *Arizona Capitol Times*, 4-5.

⁹ Van Der Werf, Martin. (April 29, 1997). Study of 4-Year Degrees for Small Colleges Vetoed. *The Arizona Republic*, B1.

¹⁰ Van Der Werf, Martin. (April 29, 1997). Study of 4-Year Degrees for Small Colleges Vetoed. *The Arizona Republic*, B1-2.

Association, the Governor's Office, and key legislators. Linda Thor served as one of the two community college members. Among the committee's responsibilities was to determine unmet higher education baccalaureate needs, identify options, and develop specific recommendations for meeting those needs. The committee was to also research non-traditional delivery needs for career or technical fields; articulation options; possibilities for community colleges and universities to coordinate and cooperate; a cost analysis; and models for the community college baccalaureate in other states.

Months later, the committee reached consensus that the Arizona Board of Regents and the Board of Directors for the Arizona Community College Association should jointly establish a committee to continue the collaborative process. The Legislature, in a 1998 footnote, provided specific charges to the committee. Thor was once again appointed, and we completed our work in December 1998. The committee proposed a system for identifying and meeting needs for additional baccalaureate degrees, but was unable to reach agreement on seeking legislation to allow the baccalaureate.

As reported by *Community College Week*, "What did emerge from the panel's work, however, was a proposal that if community college officials identified a need for a baccalaureate program, they could shop it around to the universities. If none were interested in offering the program on their own or in collaboration with a two-year college, then a joint review committee would look into other options—including handing the program to community colleges."¹¹

In the same issue, Linda stated that fears of mission creep or erosion were missing the point: "I am proud to be a community college. I do not want to be a university. We're not talking about a bachelor's that has the same characteristics. Frankly, we probably need another term. We're all getting hung up on the term bachelor's rather than talking about how community colleges meet certain needs."¹²

During 1998 the applied baccalaureate issue attracted the attention of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which referred to it as "a landmark plan," emphasized its "practitioner" approach, and raised important issues about the overall nature of baccalaureate degrees. Should they be practical or more holistic?¹³

The Revitalized 2004, 2005 and 2006 Legislative Campaigns

However, legislation would not be proposed again for six years. In spring 2004 Rep. Russell Pearce (R-Mesa), the Chair of the House Appropriations Committee, introduced a bill to allow community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees in fire science, law enforcement, nursing and teacher education in a six-year pilot. This bill was defeated in committee 9-7. However, the lawmakers left the door open to reconsider the measure at a future legislative session.

¹¹ Evelyn, Jamilah. (August 23, 1999). The Bid for the Bachelor's. *Community College Week*, 12.

¹² Evelyn, Jamilah. (August 23, 1999). The Bid for the Bachelor's. *Community College Week*, 13.

¹³ Healy, Patrick. (February 27, 1998). A 2-Year College in Arizona Bills Itself as a New Model for Public Higher Education. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, A32-33.

By 2005, Rio Salado was a dramatically expanded and different college than when the concept of the community college baccalaureate was introduced eight years prior. With credit enrollment exceeding 40,000 students annually, it was poised to emerge as the largest in headcount among the Maricopa Community Colleges. This growth was fueled largely by its online offerings, which numbered 450+ unique courses.

Working in partnership with the Maricopa District, Rio Salado was still the logical choice to advocate on behalf of all community colleges when in the winter of 2005, the community college baccalaureate issue emerged yet again in the Legislature. This time the Chair of the House Higher Education Committee, Rep. Laura Knaparek (R-Tempe), proposed House Bill 2079. It had the ardent support of several powerful legislators, including once again the House Appropriations Committee Chair, Rep. Pearce. Under the bill approximately half of Arizona's community colleges would be allowed to issue the baccalaureate, primarily in teaching, health professions, fire science and law enforcement. However, it was understood that with the exception of Rio Salado, most of the colleges were not positioned to offer all four career paths.

The legislation proposed by Rep. Knaparek would have changed how the state funds Arizona's universities and maximize use of the community college system for increased access. The funding, she stated, would follow the students, rather than the traditional "arbitrary formula where dollars are doled out by political whim instead of need."¹⁴

The legislation was bolstered by positive and widespread media coverage. In advance of the legislative session, the conservative *Daily News Sun*, serving residents of the retirement communities surrounding Sun City, issued an opinion column with the headline "Community College Bill Makes Sense." It began: "One of several disappointments by the Legislature last session was its failure to pass a sensible bill that would have allowed community colleges to begin offering four year degrees in select fields..."¹⁵ The *Arizona Republic*, which had been so opposed in 1997, challenged and chastised legislators, stating: "OK, skeptics, you axed university reform; now it's your turn for some new ideas."¹⁶ Another editorial in the *East Valley Tribune* touted, "4-Year Community College Degrees Deserve a Try."¹⁷

An additionally encouraging sign was an independent statewide public opinion poll, which found that 74% of those surveyed would support a bill "that would allow community colleges to offer four-year baccalaureate degrees."¹⁸

We again returned with our supporters to the Legislative chambers with our messages of access, affordability, specialization, economic efficiency, experience and this time, widespread support. We

¹⁴ Knaparek, Laura. (March 19, 2005). Let Funds Follow the Student. *East Valley Tribune*, B5.

¹⁵ Editorial Staff. (December 6, 2004). Community College Bill Makes Sense. *Daily News-Sun*, A6.

¹⁶ Editorial Staff. (February 16, 2005). Higher Education/Our Stand: OK, Skeptics, You Axed University Reform; Now It's Your Turn For Some New Ideas. *The Arizona Republic*, B6.

¹⁷ Editorial Staff. (December 2, 2005). 4-Year Community College Degrees Deserve a Try. *East Valley Tribune*, A20.

¹⁸ Merrill, Bruce. (February 22, 2005). Press Release. Cronkite/Eight Poll: Voters Don't Want Junk Food in the Schools in the Schools, But They Do Want Community Colleges to Award Four-Year Diplomas. Walter Cronkite School of Journalism, Arizona State University.

cited U.S. Census statistics indicating that Arizona ranks 20th in population with three public universities. In contrast, Maryland, ranking 19th in population, has 14 public universities, and Minnesota, ranking 21st in population, has 14 public universities. We told legislators how Rio Salado's 10,600 occupational certificates and degrees in 2004 accounted for 76% of the total awards presented that year. We were pleased to report that the accrediting body for Arizona's community colleges and three public universities—the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association—had concluded that these degrees would not compromise the community colleges' traditional mission.

But once again, HB2079 was met with fierce opposition from the universities and turf wars erupted. Each committee meeting was populated by a sizable number of opposition lobbyists from both the private sector, including the UOP, and the public sector, including all three state universities. And again, the representative from ATRA was on hand, claiming that taxpayers would be left footing the bill. As always, our position was that an adjusted tuition plan would pay for the costs incurred. However, university lobbyists told the legislators that if passed, the bill would cost the state \$20 million in its first year alone.

In spite of this, the bill proceeded fairly smoothly through the House, and was then approved by the Senate Higher Education Committee. At this point, we were as cautiously optimistic as we had ever been. It appeared this time the applied baccalaureate just might become a reality. The final hurdle to pass the bill was the vote in the Senate Appropriations Committee, scheduled for April 5, 2005. However, before any testimony was heard, Bob Burns (R-Peoria) who chaired the Senate Appropriations Committee, told Rep. Knaparek, "I don't think the bill, in its present form, will be able to make it through this committee."¹⁹

In a last-minute attempt to keep her legislation alive, Rep. Knaparek offered an amendment that would have gutted the specifics of the bill. For instance, it would have taken out any reference to funding. That would have eliminated writing a new university funding formula into statute. Under her revision, the community colleges would have been authorized to offer baccalaureate degrees without any funding. Nevertheless, on April 5, 2005, the community college baccalaureate bill received its final legislative defeat in the Senate Appropriations Committee on a 6-5 vote. The majority sided with university lobbyists who called for more time to study the state's higher education gaps and then determine the best way to fill them.

In spite of so many legislative committee meetings and testimonies, a previous report from an appointed Higher Education Committee, positive media messages, and community support, the cause was defeated by a single vote. In Rep. Knaparek's words, "The political reality is that their lobbyists beat us." She complained that the universities feared a "more cost-efficient competitor."²⁰

The rhetoric intensified within the media. "Blocking Community Colleges' 4-year Aspirations is Asinine" stated the *Arizona Republic*, adding: "Sensible people have been asking for years why this

¹⁹ Slivka, Judd. (April 6, 2005). College Bill Dies in Senate. The Arizona Republic, B1-2.

²⁰ Slivka, Judd. (April 6, 2005). College Bill Dies in Senate. The Arizona Republic, B1-2.

arbitrary barrier to community colleges meeting expanding educational demands in a variety of areas persists.”²¹

But in an unusual twist, six days later the baccalaureate authority was resurrected under a special legislative format as SB1109, ultimately passing through the full House on a 31-28 vote and proceeding to the Senate, where it was once again killed. Reminiscent of years before, another study committee was convened, this one called the Joint Ad Hoc Task Force on Higher Education.

By the end of 2005, the applied baccalaureate was still receiving considerable renewed media attention. Articles in the state’s largest newspapers were reporting a more positive outlook for the community college baccalaureate in Arizona. A Dec. 19 article appeared in the *Arizona Republic* with the headline: “Support For 4-Year degrees mounting.”²²

The Dec. 2, 2005 *East Valley Tribune* published this headline: “4-year community college degrees deserve a try.”²³ The editorial called for pilot programs, while mocking a UOP-funded study that concluded the applied baccalaureate was a bad idea. The headline for another *Tribune* commentary by a Scottsdale City Councilman stated: “ASU’s gouging justifies 4-year community college degrees.”²⁴ The councilman pointed out that 70% tuition increases at ASU do not follow the state university mission to provide in-state instruction in a manner “as nearly free as possible.”

Nevertheless, we were proud of the fact that this bill, which was characterized as higher education reform legislation, was approved by the full House and made it through its policy committee in the Senate. Although we faced heavy opposition and extensive public and behind-the-scenes lobbying by the public and private universities, we persevered because we believe that providing access to affordable, accessible baccalaureate degrees is the right thing to do for our students and our state.

Legislation for the applied baccalaureate would be sponsored one more time, in spring 2006. Rep. Knaparek, still chair of the House Higher Education Committee, again introduced bill, but it was compromised to the point that we could not support it.

Economic Crisis Precipitates Call for New Models

Five more years would pass before community college baccalaureate legislation was again introduced in the 2011 Arizona Legislative Session. In the intervening years, much had transpired locally on the economic front. Like California and other rapidly-growing states, Arizona’s economy had been hit extremely hard by the economic recession. The State of Arizona found itself with as much as a \$6 billion annual budget shortfall. In an effort to balance the state’s budget, higher

²¹ Editorial Staff. (April 7, 2005). Craven Cave-In: Blocking Community Colleges’ 4-Year Aspirations Is Asinine.” *The Arizona Republic*, A12.

²² Editorial Staff. (December 19, 2005). Support For 4-year Degrees Mounting. *The Arizona Republic*,

²³ Editorial Staff. (December 2, 2005). 4-Year Community College Degrees Deserve a Try. *East Valley Tribune*, A20.

²⁴ Lane, Jim. (date>) East Valley Voice: ASU’s Gouging Justifies 4-Year Community College Degrees. *East Valley Tribune*, A12.

education allocations for universities and community colleges were drastically reduced, and at one point there was an attempt to cut community college funding by as much as 50%.

In January 2011, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer, who is a community college graduate, called for more significant higher education budget cuts. However, in a special directive to the 2011 Arizona Legislature, Gov. Brewer stated she wanted to explore whether community colleges should be empowered to grant bachelor's degrees.

The Governor told the legislature there is no way the state can financially maintain Arizona's higher education system in its present form. She called for solutions beyond the extremes of further hikes in tuition or eliminating programs. In short, she called for new models of higher education that will not only expand existing programs to allow students to start their baccalaureate degrees at community colleges, but also for the creation of new four-year schools. Another option would be having additional campuses for the three public universities around the state, but with lower tuition than charged at the main campuses in Tucson, Tempe and Flagstaff. Other options she believed worth considering are the expansion of 2+ 2 programs. Ultimately, the governor set a goal to double the number of Arizona's students earning baccalaureate degrees by 2020.

Subsequently, during the 2011 Arizona Legislative Session, two bills were introduced. HB 2277 was introduced in the House, discussed and HELD in the House Appropriations Committee after much debate. This bill would have allowed any community college district in the state to offer baccalaureate degrees in Elementary Education and Nursing programs.

The second bill, SB 1289, failed on the Senate Floor on a 3rd Reading vote of 8 -21. This bill would have only allowed rural Eastern Arizona College (EAC) to offer baccalaureate degrees in three areas: Education, Business, and Mining Technology. Six months after that defeat, ASU announced a partnership with EAC to offer associate's and bachelor's degrees at tuition of \$5,500 dollars per year, a little more than half of the normal annual ASU tuition of close to \$10,000. The degree programs will be implemented in phases, starting with associate's degrees in nursing. Eventually, bachelor's degree programs will be offered in nursing, business/organizational studies, elementary education, operational management and more.

Lessons Learned

If hindsight is always 20-20, what would we do differently from a strategic point of view?

We believe we have learned the following lessons that may help colleges in other states advance their own cause of achieving the baccalaureate.

1. From the start, we needed more grassroots momentum leading the charge.

Admittedly, back in 1997 we were called upon to respond on extremely short notice when we were first approached by Sen. Carol Springer. The legislature was already in session. As a result, we did not have ample time to plan and execute a thoroughly organized grassroots campaign. Therefore, we advocated primarily through frequent testimony and through the

supportive voices and letters of select members of the community, such as the heads of the Arizona Nursing Association and the Phoenix Law Enforcement Association.

What was also missing from our campaign was the voice of the community at large, backing up our statements that there was a great demand for these baccalaureates. The community college baccalaureate was a radical concept for people to grasp, and unfortunately, not enough people were sold on the idea. A greater volume of powerful messages from our constituents, including students and even their parents, would ideally have reinforced these messages: Arizona needs a more highly educated workforce to compete and experience economic growth. We need more options to educate our youth and working adults within our own communities, where they will then likely reside and become taxpayers. We need more highly educated police, more allied health workers, more computer technicians, and more general business graduates than the universities alone can currently provide.

Also missing was an organized movement that would present students and their parents sharing their issues of access in their own words to the legislators. Ideally, after it was organized it would be led by "the people" so the community colleges don't appear self-serving.

Unfortunately, without this grassroots momentum, our campaigns eventually fizzled. Even worse, the community colleges often appeared to be self-serving or greedy and to not have the greater community good in mind. We were inadvertently positioned as adversaries to the very popular universities. Of course, in reality the opposite was true: Our cause would greatly benefit the community through increased options that the universities were not interested in providing.

The issue of building substantial grassroots momentum did not improve in subsequent years. Legislation for the baccalaureate was not introduced during every legislative session. We typically received very brief notice when the cause was about to be revived by one or more legislators. Coupled with this short notice was the fact that in several of those years, we were also engaged in very aggressive legislative battles to retain funding for our free Adult Basic Education classes, which had grown to become the largest program of its type in Arizona. Our resources and collective energy were spread thin during those years. We had to carefully choose our battles.

2. We needed to attract more peer support from within the leadership ranks of Arizona's community colleges themselves.

Throughout the eight-year battle for the baccalaureate, the issue proved to be highly sensitive among members of the Chancellor's Executive Council, which consisted of the Chancellor, all 10 presidents, and four vice chancellors. This was understandable, since not every college stood to benefit equally from the community college baccalaureate. In fact, a number of the colleges would not initially benefit at all, simply because the model did not fit their individual mission. This contributed to Rio Salado's reputation as a renegade college.

This was particularly true back in 1997. Although the Arizona Community Colleges Presidents' Council supported SB 1109, behind the scenes some of the state's community colleges were questioning why any of us would want to offer applied baccalaureates, and commenting publicly in local news media. Furthermore, support for our position was met with limited enthusiasm from our colleagues at the national level. "We are who we are," said David Pierce,

then-president of the American Association of Community Colleges. “We are community-based, associate-degree-granting institutions. This [granting baccalaureate degrees] isn’t necessarily our job.”²⁵

3. We underestimated the collective power of the public and private universities when they unite as allies.

As we discussed, at every legislative committee meeting, we were up against the very large, polished, and vocal contingent of unified lobbyists from the public and private universities—a sort of David and Goliath match-up. But in our case, the underdog did not always command sympathy from the majority of the legislators. In fact, our team of lobbyists was outnumbered eight to one. Also, the objections of the university lobbyists were bolstered by the Arizona Taxpayers Research Association (ATRA), which insisted that we were withholding the fact that that this was going to be a very expensive proposition for the public. The community colleges were unfairly perceived as wanting something for themselves—a type of power grab if you will—that was unnecessary. Therefore, the public and private universities came across as the ones who were truly looking out for the best interests of the general public.

4. We didn’t anticipate the legislators viewing the controversy behind the applied baccalaureate among higher education entities as a “family feud.”

The university lobbyists were already well positioned and had favor with the legislators due to the enormous local popularity of their campuses. The legislators could see merits behind both sides of the argument. Therefore, they wanted to avoid being held liable as decision-makers in a very divisive debate. They wanted the universities and community colleges to work the issue out among themselves.. But we could not, because the applied baccalaureate involved a change in statute.

The Rio Salado story is unique due to Arizona’s political composition. Each state’s political structure may call for different tactics and strategies. Issues of cost duplication and mission erosion and creep will always arise and need detailed explanations.

Subsequent Progress

As of early 2012, there is still no community college baccalaureate in Arizona. However, we believe our cause has yielded some positive outcomes. In the absence of formal legislation, we can report that several unprecedented avenues have opened that now increase access or transferability for students across our state and outside of Arizona. For example:

- Previously the Associate of Applied Science degree would not transfer. Now it is accepted as a block in the new Baccalaureate of Applied Science degree at NAU, ASU Polytechnic Campus and ASU West Campus.
- ASU and Rio Salado have a joint online Baccalaureate in Interdisciplinary Studies degree that transfers 75 credits from the community college.
- NAU accepts 90 credits from the Maricopa Community Colleges into the Baccalaureate of Interdisciplinary Studies program.

²⁵ Evelyn, Jamilah. (August 23, 1999). The Bid for the Bachelor’s. *Community College Week*, 13.

- The Maricopa Community Colleges now have articulation agreements with more than 25 states and out-of-state universities that transfer between 75 and 90 community college credits.
- The ASU Polytechnic Campus has two Maricopa Community College partners onsite; namely, Chandler-Gilbert Community College and Mesa Community College.
- The nation's first communiversity west of the Mississippi opened in 2009 and features unique public-private partnerships between the City of Surprise, Rio Salado, Glendale Community College, Phoenix College, Ottawa University and West-MEC, a public school district specializing in vocational education
- A similar communiversity is underway in the Town of Queen Creek, Arizona.

On the Horizon...Another Opportunity?

It is clear that the story of the community college baccalaureate in Arizona remains unfinished. Despite enduring multiple years of a housing collapse and state budget crises that mirror the national scene, Arizona emerged in the 2010 U.S. Census as the second-fastest growing state in population. Arizona is currently home to nearly 6.6 million residents, which translates into more than a 28% growth rate since the 2000 U.S. Census. In contrast, the total U.S. population recorded growth of slightly more than 9% during the same decade. Arizona, like most western states, is growing faster than the nation as a whole. Furthermore, more than 1 out of every 4 Arizonans is under the age of 18, which also exceeds the national average, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.²⁶

Faced with shrinking financial resources, the state's higher education institutions must undergo revolutionary changes to comprehensively serve two burgeoning populations: youth who will graduate from high school in the coming decade, and adults who will need to be retrained and retooled to keep pace with the state's post-recession job market. We would argue that in the foreseeable future, the only logical solution for our state is to move forward with new models of public higher education, which include the community college baccalaureate.

²⁶ U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts, Retrieved 22 February 2011, from The U.S. Census Bureau web site, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/04000.html>