**Benefits and Challenges of Community Colleges Partnering with Four-Year Institutions to Offer Bachelor’s Degrees: A Literature Review**

Nakisha D. Smith

School of Education, Liberty University

**Author Note**

Nakisha D. Smith

I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to

Nakisha D. Smith. Email: ndsmith10@liberty.edu

# Abstract

This literature review explores the benefits and challenges of community colleges partnering with four-year institutions to offer bachelor’s degrees. By integrating findings from different studies, this review aims to highlight the impact of such partnerships on students, institutions, and the local workforce. Key pieces include increased accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and the need for strategic collaboration to maximize positive outcomes.

*Keywords*: community college, baccalaureate degree, four-year institution

**Benefits and Challenges of Community Colleges Partnering with Four-Year Institutions to Offer Bachelor’s Degrees: A Literature Review**

The landscape of higher education is frequently evolving, with increasing emphasis on making education more accessible, affordable, and aligned with the demands of the workforce. One significant trend in this respect is the collaboration between community colleges and four-year institutions to offer bachelor's degrees. These alliances seek to fill the void between two-year and four-year programs, providing students with more flexible and affordable pathways to higher education.

Traditionally, community colleges are viewed as associate degree and vocational training institutions. However, the introduction of the Community College Baccalaureate (CCB) has expanded their role, allowing them to offer bachelor's degrees in various fields (Blume, 2020). This shift is driven by the need to address the growing demand for higher education and the changing needs of the job market. For many students, community colleges offer a more convenient and inexpensive option compared to traditional four-year institutions, especially for non-traditional students who may face financial, geographical, or personal barriers to education (Wetzstein et al., 2020).

The benefits of such partnerships are various. They can lead to increased enrollment in higher education, reduced educational costs for students, and improved economic outcomes for graduates (Wright-Kim, 2022). Furthermore, these collaborations can help institutions alter their coursework and draw a broader spectrum of students. For example, dual enrollment programs, which allow high school students to take college courses, can enhance college readiness and reduce the time and cost required to complete a degree (Habib, 2024). Students may graduate with an associate degree thereby increasing the opportunity to transfer to a four-year university and possibly apply 60 credit hours towards a bachelor’s degree.

Despite the potential benefits, these partnerships also face several challenges. One major issue is the competition between community colleges and four-year institutions for students and resources. Four-year institutions may be concerned about losing market share to community colleges, which can create tension and hinder collaboration (Kramer et al., 2021). Additionally, there are logistical challenges related to transfer pathways which are plans to help with aligning curricula, transferring credits, and providing adequate academic support to ensure student success (Martinez & Elue, 2020).

**Key Themes**

This literature review explores the benefits and challenges associated with community colleges partnering with four-year institutions to offer bachelor's degrees. By synthesizing findings from various studies, it aims to highlight the impact of these partnerships on students, institutions, and the local workforce. The review will be organized around key themes, including increased accessibility and affordability, student success and academic outcomes, institutional and economic impacts, and barriers and facilitators to effective partnerships. Through this focused synthesis, the review seeks to provide insights into how these partnerships can be structured to maximize positive outcomes.

**Increased Affordability and Accessibility**

One of the primary advantages of community colleges partnering with four-year institutions to offer bachelor's degrees is the increased accessibility and affordability of higher education. Community colleges are often more geographically spread than four-year institutions, making them more accessible to students in rural or underserved areas. This geographical advantage means that students who may otherwise be unable to attend a four-year institution due to location or transportation problems may still pursue a bachelor's degree (Blume, 2020).

Additionally, community colleges typically have lower tuition rates compared to four-year institutions. This affordability is crucial for students from low-income backgrounds or those who are financially independent. By beginning their education at a community college and then transferring to a four-year institution, or by completing a bachelor's degree entirely at a community college, students can significantly reduce their overall educational expenses. This pathway not only lowers tuition costs but also reduces related expenses such as housing and transportation, especially for students who can live at home while attending a nearby community college (Wright-Kim, 2022).

The affordability of community colleges is further sweetened by the availability of Federal Student Aid programs such as the Federal Pell Grant (U.S. Department of Education, 2018) and scholarships specifically targeted at community college students which do not require repayment. For instance, many states have implemented programs that provide tuition-free community college education to qualifying students, which can then be extended to cover bachelor's degree programs offered by these institutions. Such financial support plays a critical role in making higher education more accessible to a broader population (Blume, 2020).

Furthermore, community colleges often serve a diverse student population, including non-traditional students such as adult learners, part-time students, and those who are returning to education after a significant gap. These students might find the flexible scheduling, smaller class sizes, and supportive environment of community colleges more conducive to their educational needs compared to traditional four-year institutions. Programs like the Community College Baccalaureate (CCB) are designed to cater to these students by offering flexible course schedules, online learning options, and targeted academic support services (Wetzstein et al., 2020).

The partnership between community colleges and four-year institutions can also lead to innovative program offerings and transfer pathways that streamline the educational process. For example, dual enrollment programs allow high school students to take college courses that count towards both high school and college credit, thus accelerating their educational trajectory and reducing the time and cost to obtain a bachelor's degree. Such programs have been shown to improve college readiness and increase the likelihood of college completion (Habib, 2024).

**Student Success and Academic Outcomes**

The partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions not only make higher education more accessible and affordable but also enhance student success and academic outcomes. These collaborations often incorporate various strategies and programs designed to support student achievement, persistence, and completion.

One significant strategy is the use of online course-taking options. Fischer et al. (2021) found that online courses can play a crucial role in increasing college completion rates and reducing time-to-degree. The flexibility of online and distance learning entitles students to balance their educational pursuits with other essential responsibilities such as work and family life. This stretch is incredibly beneficial for non-traditional students who may find it difficult to attend traditional on-campus classes. Furthermore, online studies often provide access to a broader range of subjects and expertise, thereby enriching the academic experience and supporting diverse learning needs (Fischer et al., 2021).

Dual enrollment programs, which allow high school students opportunities to take college courses for credit, are another practical tool for improving student success. These programs not only reduce the time and cost needed to complete a degree but also help students transition smoothly from high school to college. Habib (2024) noted that dual enrollment programs can significantly boost college readiness and increase the likelihood of college completion. Students who partake in dual enrollment are better prepared for the academic rigor of college-level work and often have higher GPAs and graduation rates in comparison to their peers who do not participate in such academic programs (Habib, 2024).

Academic advising is another necessary component of student success in the context of community college and four-year institution partnerships. Effective advising helps students navigate the complexities of transfer pathways, ensuring that they take the necessary courses and meet the requirements for a seamless transition. Martinez and Elue (2020) highlighted the importance of strong academic advising systems in facilitating student progress and success. They emphasized that personalized advising could help address individual student needs, reduce transfer shock, and improve retention and graduation rates (Martinez & Elue, 2020).

The role of faculty is also pivotal in supporting student success, especially for mid- and later-life students who return to education. Cummins et al. (2021) examined the barriers and facilitators for these students, finding that faculty support and engagement are critical for their academic success. Faculty who are aware of and responsive to the unique challenges faced by non-traditional students can provide the encouragement and assistance needed to keep them on track towards degree completion (Cummins et al., 2021).

Also, partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions can lead to the development of tailored academic programs that align with local workforce needs. This alignment not only enhances the relevance of the education provided but also improves employment outcomes for graduates. Wright-Kim (2022) discussed the dynamic financial implications of these programs, noting that they often lead to better job placement and higher earnings for graduates, which in turn contributes to the economic vitality of the local community (Wright-Kim, 2022).

**Institutional and Economic Impacts**

Partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions offering bachelor's degrees have profound institutional and economic impacts. These collaborations can lead to increased enrollment, improved funding opportunities, and significant contributions to the local workforce and economy. One of the primary institutional benefits is the potential for increased enrollment. Community colleges offering bachelor's degrees can attract a broader range of students, including those who might have attended a four-year institution. It expanded student base can result in higher enrollment and increased tuition revenue. Wright-Kim (2022) explored the financial implications of these programs, noting that community colleges offering bachelor's degrees often experience an uptick in enrollment, which can enhance their financial stability and allow for further investments in academic programs and student services (Wright-Kim, 2022).

What's more, community colleges can benefit from additional funding opportunities linked to offering bachelor's degrees. These may include state funding, grants, and partnerships with local industries that value the skilled workforce produced by these programs. Wright-Kim (2022) highlighted that institutions offering CCB programs might receive targeted funding to expand access to higher education and meet workforce needs. This financial support can be crucial for developing new programs, improving facilities, and providing scholarships and financial aid to students (Wright-Kim, 2022).

Introducing bachelor's degree programs at community colleges also has significant economic impacts on the local workforce. Graduates of these programs often possess the skills and qualifications needed to fill high-demand jobs in their communities. This alignment between educational offerings and local economic needs ensures that graduates are well-prepared to enter the workforce, contributing to economic development. Wetzstein et al. (2020) emphasized that CCB graduates typically enjoy improved employment prospects and economic security, which supports their communities' economic vitality. The presence of a well-educated workforce can attract businesses and industries to the area, fostering economic growth and development (Wetzstein et al., 2020).

Another important economic impact is the role of these partnerships in addressing workforce shortages. By offering bachelor's degree programs tailored to the needs of local industries, community colleges can help fill the void between the supply of qualified workers and the demand for skilled labor. It is imperative in healthcare, education, and technology, where more qualified professionals are often needed. Blume (2020) notes that community colleges are uniquely positioned to respond to these needs due to their strong ties to local employers and ability to quickly adapt programs to meet evolving workforce demands (Blume, 2020).

Additionally, the partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions can enhance the reputation and prestige of community colleges. These institutions can elevate their academic standing by offering high-quality bachelor's degree programs and become more competitive in the higher education market. This improved reputation can attract more students and high-caliber faculty and staff, enhancing the institution's academic and operational excellence (Kramer et al., 2021).

**Barriers and Facilitators to Effective Partnerships**

***Barriers***

One significant barrier is the competition between community colleges and four-year institutions. Four-year institutions may perceive community colleges offering bachelor's degrees as threatening their market share, leading to resistance against forming partnerships (Kramer et al., 2021). This competitive dynamic can create an environment of mistrust and hinder the development of cooperative programs.

Ensuring that the curricula of community colleges and four-year institutions align is a complex and challenging process. Misalignment can result in issues with credit transfer, where students may find that not all of their community college credits are accepted by the partnering four-year institution. This barrier can discourage students from pursuing these pathways and complicate their educational journey (Martinez & Elue, 2020).

Community colleges often operate with limited financial and administrative resources. Establishing and maintaining bachelor’s degree programs requires significant investments in faculty, facilities, and support services. These resource constraints can limit the capacity of community colleges to offer comprehensive and high-quality bachelor’s degree programs (Wright-Kim, 2022).

Faculty members at both community colleges and four-year institutions may resist changes associated with these partnerships. Community college faculty might be concerned about increased workload and the need for additional qualifications to teach upper-division courses. Conversely, faculty at four-year institutions may fear a dilution of academic standards (Cummins et al., 2021).

***Facilitators***

Academically solid advising systems support students transitioning from community colleges to four-year institutions. Effective advising ensures students understand transfer requirements, select appropriate courses, and remain on track to complete their degrees. Martinez and Elue (2020) emphasized the importance of personalized advising in reducing transfer shock and improving student outcomes (Martinez & Elue, 2020).

Financial incentives and support can facilitate partnerships by addressing resource constraints. Grants, state funding, and private sector investments can provide the necessary financial backing to develop and sustain bachelor's degree programs at community colleges. Wright-Kim (2022) noted that targeted financial support is critical for expanding access to higher education and meeting workforce needs (Wright-Kim, 2022).

Encouraging faculty development and collaboration between community colleges and four-year institutions can help overcome resistance and improve program quality. Joint professional development opportunities, cross-institutional teaching teams, and collaborative research initiatives can foster a sense of shared purpose and enhance the academic rigor of partnership programs (Cummins et al., 2021).

Supportive policies and legislation at the state and federal levels can facilitate the establishment and growth of partnerships. Policies that streamline credit transfer processes, provide funding for dual enrollment programs, and incentivize collaborations between community colleges and four-year institutions can create an enabling environment for these partnerships to thrive (Blume, 2020).

**Conclusion**

The partnership between community colleges and four-year institutions to offer bachelor's degrees represents a transformative approach to higher education aimed at addressing the needs of a diverse student population while simultaneously meeting local workforce demands. This literature review has examined the various benefits, challenges, and strategies associated with these collaborations, organized around key themes including increased accessibility and affordability, student success and academic outcomes, institutional and economic impacts, and barriers and facilitators to effective partnerships.

Increased accessibility and affordability are among the most significant advantages of these partnerships.

Community colleges provide an accessible and cost-effective entry point to higher education for students from diverse backgrounds, including those from low-income families and non-traditional learners. Programs such as the Community College Baccalaureate (CCB) and dual enrollment initiatives not only reduce the financial burden on students but also decrease the time needed to complete a bachelor's degree, making higher education more attainable and equitable (Blume, 2020; Wright-Kim, 2022; Habib, 2024).

These partnerships enhance student success and academic outcomes by leveraging online course offerings, robust academic advising, and supportive faculty. These elements help students manage their studies alongside other responsibilities and ensure they are well-prepared for academic rigor. As a result, students experience higher retention and graduation rates, ultimately leading to better academic and professional outcomes (Fischer et al., 2021; Martinez & Elue, 2020; Cummins et al., 2021).

The institutional and economic impacts of these collaborations are profound. Community colleges offering bachelor's degrees can see increased enrollment and funding opportunities, enhancing their financial stability and capacity to invest in academic programs and student services. Moreover, aligning educational programs with local workforce needs ensures that graduates are well-equipped for employment, contributing to regional economic development and addressing workforce shortages in critical industries (Wright-Kim, 2022; Wetzstein et al., 2020; Blume, 2020).

However, the success of these partnerships is contingent upon overcoming several barriers. Significant challenges include institutional competition, curricular misalignment, resource constraints, and faculty resistance. Addressing these barriers requires strong leadership, comprehensive advising systems, financial support, faculty development, and supportive policies. Facilitators such as these are crucial for fostering an environment conducive to collaboration and ensuring the sustainability of these partnerships (Kramer et al., 2021; Martinez & Elue, 2020; Wright-Kim, 2022; Cummins et al., 2021; Blume, 2020).

In conclusion, the partnership between community colleges and four-year institutions to offer bachelor's degrees holds considerable promise for enhancing higher education. By leveraging the strengths of both types of institutions, these collaborations can provide more equitable access to higher education, improve student outcomes, and contribute to the economic vitality of local communities. Addressing the identified barriers and playing on the facilitators will be critical for boosting the advantages of these partnerships and ensuring their long-term success. Through strategic planning, resource investment, and a commitment to collaboration, community colleges and four-year institutions can create innovative pathways that meet the evolving needs of students and the workforce, thereby fostering a more inclusive and responsive higher education system.

**References**

*Campus Safety and Security*. (2024). Ope.ed.gov. <https://ope.ed.gov/campussafety/#/compare/details>

*Code of Virginia Code - Article 1. Definitions*. (2024). Virginia.gov. <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacodefull/title23.1/chapter1/article1/>

Blume, G. (2020). How do students earning ccb degrees compare to their peers at public universities in Washington state? *Community College Research Initiatives, Data Note 5.* <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED608174.pdf>

Fischer, C., Baker, R., Li, Q., Orona, G. A., & Warschauer, M. (2021). Increasing success in higher education: The relationships of online course taking with college completion and time-to-degree. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *44*(3), 016237372110557. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737211055768>

Cummins, P. A., Arbogast, A., McGrew, K., & Bahr, P. R. (2021). Barriers and facilitators for mid- and later-life community college students: The role of faculty. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *46*(6), 431–434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2021.1876783>

Habib, N. (2024, May 20). *Hampton’s dual enrollment program grows, sees record number of grads — and more opportunities are coming to region*. Daily Press. <https://www.dailypress.com/2024/05/20/hamptons-dual-enrollment-program-grows-sees-record-number-of-grads-and-more-opportunities-are-coming-to-region/>

Kramer, D. A., Ortagus, J. C., & Donovan, J. (2021). Competing for bachelor’s degrees: Are community colleges cutting into the market share of 4-year institutions? *American Educational Research Journal*, 58(2), 343-385. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831220946309>

Martinez, E., & Elue, C. (2020). Academic advising and the community college baccalaureate: Implications for research, policy, and practice. *NACADA Journal*, 40(1), 110–122. <https://doi.org/10.12930/nacada-18-16>

U.S. Department of Education. (2018). *Federal Pell Grants*. Federal Student Aid. <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/grants/pell>

Wetzstein, L., Meza, E. A., Bragg, D. D. (2020). Washington community college baccalaureate students: How life experiences shape baccalaureate education, employment, and economic security. *Community College Research Initiatives, Data Note 10*.<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED610376.pdf>

Wright-Kim, J. (2022). The dynamic financial implications of the community college baccalaureate: An institutional exploration. *AERA Open*, *8*, 233285842211264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584221126473>