

Bakersfield College seeks to add four-year degree

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Shawna Anderson, a student at Bakersfield College, said she had to seek and accept every package of government assistance she could find to support herself and her son, Chase, while she pursued an associate's degree in nursing.

"I rely on financial aid. I was on unemployment, food stamps. You name it, I'm on it," Anderson said.

She plans to complete her associate's degree in May, take state licensing examination soon after and begin working.

But she wishes she could have earned a four-year nursing degree at BC, which would have been a cheaper alternative than transferring to a university like Cal State Bakersfield.

Research shows that an advanced level of nursing education means higher pay, improved management and leadership opportunities and better patient outcomes -- all benefits that Anderson could have had more immediate access to if proposed legislation were already law, local advocates argue.

Cindy Collier, dean of nursing and allied health at BC, said the school has been rallying support for a state Senate bill that would establish temporary baccalaureate degree programs as part of a pilot community college effort to meet region-specific workforce needs.

The bill, Senate Bill 850, would grant select two-year campuses authorization to -- for no more than eight years -- offer four-year college degrees in subject areas intended to address most urgent local workforce needs.

In Bakersfield, Collier said, that subject area is nursing.

"It's not like we're trying to do a baccalaureate degree in English. It really is based on workforce needs," she said.

Collier said nursing and school officials petitioned the California Community College's Chancellor's Office for inclusion in the pilot program, gathered support from faculty and staff members and circulated a petition of support that about 100 students backed.

She said adding four-year offerings at community colleges is not a new conversation. The first legislation was proposed in 2004, and there have been four unsuccessful attempts since, Collier said.

"This is the most active that I've ever seen the conversation happen," she said.

The chancellor's office released a report earlier this year that said the bill could counteract California's drop to 14th place in a U.S. ranking of residents with bachelor's degrees and increase college participation rates among local residents unable to relocate to areas with four-year universities.

Beth Hagan, executive director of the nonprofit Community College Baccalaureate Association, said 21 states allow community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees but California would be the largest.

New York became the first state to allow community colleges to confer or offer four-year degrees in 1970, Hagan said. West Virginia added the offering in 1990; Utah followed suit in 1993.

The idea has been met with some push back from university systems and community college advocates.

Critics of the measure contend that adding four-year degree options at two-year colleges would change the culture and purpose of the institutions and "would diminish attention to transfer, basic skills, and career technical education."

Hagan rejected the claims. She said almost all community colleges allow students to access four-year degrees in some fashion, either through partnership programs or added resources.

"People think that because a community college can confer baccalaureate degrees they become a four-year college, and that's just not true," she said.

The Institute of Medicine, a nonprofit, released a landmark report in 2010 that called for 80 percent of working nurses to be "baccalaureate-prepared."

The American Association of Colleges of Nursing reported that 55 percent of registered nurses in 2010 had prepared at the baccalaureate or graduate degree level.

"We're probably around 25 percent," Chief Nurse Executive Terri Church said of Bakersfield Memorial Hospital's nursing staff.

Church, who has been a nurse for more than 35 years, said educational requirements to become a nurse have evolved over the years.

She said many hospitals no longer seek nurses with only on-the-job training; most require an associate's degree. If nurses want to move up in the ranks, they're going to need bachelor's degrees.

Experts in the field are balancing the need to address a nursing shortage with a changing field expectation for higher postsecondary preparation.

"We can't cripple our country," Church said.

She added that CSUB, which offers a four-year degree in nursing, is a great school.

"But they can only produce so many nurses," Church said.

Colleen Dillaway, director of communications at CSUB, said the school's leadership believes more funding to support existing CSUB nursing programs is a better answer to the nursing shortage than establishing a new program at BC.

She said CSUB has the facilities, curriculum and proven ability to produce highly trained nursing graduates.

"Why create a new wheel?" she asked.

Although the school's nursing program does not have a waiting list, it is currently an impacted program, which means access is limited to applicants who meet added requirements.

The intent is to restrict applicant pools to align with funding constraints, according to a Cal State University spokesman.

Dillaway said most transfer students complete the CSUB nursing program in three quarters at a cost of \$2,258 per quarter (\$6,774 total).

Although legislators have not yet outlined a cost structure in the Senate bill, the idea is for the program to be cheaper than a four-year degree but more expensive than a two-year one, Collier said.

She added that the school's goal in seeking inclusion in the potential pilot program is to increase accessibility and decrease costs for students like Anderson.

"Our goal is not to be in competition with Cal State," Collier said. "Our goal is to augment what this community needs.

"And this community needs more nurses who are baccalaureate-trained. The reality is we have to look at accessibility and cost."