DAILY BREEZE

California community colleges may soon offer bachelor's degrees

By Josh Dulaney, The Daily Breeze

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Up to 15 community colleges could start offering a bachelor's degree next year under a bill working its way through the state Assembly.

Senate Bill 850, introduced by state Sen. Marty Block, D-San Diego, would authorize California Community Colleges, in consultation with the California State University and University of California systems, to launch the baccalaureate degree pilot program Jan. 1.

"What we're seeing nationwide is there is a huge skills gap, and so we know the community colleges have not just the ability to fill that gap but are uniquely placed to do it," said Kevin Powers, a legislative consultant for Block.

In an experimental departure from current law that restricts community colleges to offering two-year associate's degrees only, SB 850, which passed the state Senate last month by a 34-0 vote and is in the Assembly Committee on Higher Education, would allow 15 campuses among the 112 community colleges in the state to offer one baccalaureate degree each under the pilot program, beginning no later than the 2017-18 academic year.

California would join more than 20 other states in allowing community colleges to offer bachelor's degrees.

The state community college Board of Governors and Chancellor, in working with CSU and the UC, would select which districts and campuses are allowed to participate in the program. Bachelor's degrees offered at the 15 community colleges must not be available at the state's public four-year schools, and the college districts must document the unmet workforce needs that the degree would help fill.

Under SB 850, participating community college districts would be required to report to the Chancellor's Office on the percentage of students completing the baccalaureate degree, the fiscal self-sustainability of the program and the number of students who received jobs in the field of study of their degree.

The UC system has not yet taken a position on SB 850. A spokesperson said Thursday it is still being analyzed and the system has historically viewed the state's Master Plan for Higher Education as "an efficient way of managing and allocating limited resources to equally important higher education functions" that has served California well. CSU favors the bill.

"The California State University supports SB 850 and appreciates the collaboration by Senator Block and his staff on trying to meet the state's workforce needs," CSU spokesman Mike Uhlenkamp said in an email. "We look forward to working with our colleagues at the California Community Colleges on finding innovative ways to meet new or unmet demands in fields of study and areas that are not currently served by our campuses."

Last week, the Chancellor's Office for California Community Colleges wrote a letter of support for the bill to Assemblyman Das Williams, D-Santa Barbara, who chairs the higher education committee, saying SB 850 "does not seek to change the mission of the community colleges in the Master Plan for Higher Education. It only seeks to help the state of California address unmet workforce needs in fields where entry requirements have progressed beyond the associate degree level."

FEES CAPPED

SB 850 as currently written requires that students in the pilot program not be charged fees higher than the mandatory systemwide fees charged for baccalaureate degree programs at CSU.

A funding model to support the program must be developed by the California community college system, and Powers said funding could come from sources such as grants to fund innovation in state higher education, or state funding for career technical education.

The bill has received support from more than a dozen community college districts in the state.

"For other districts, especially if they are miles and miles from a CSU and a UC, for the remote colleges, it's a very good bill for them," said Linda L. Lacy, president-superintendent of Cerritos College in Norwalk. "It's working in other states and it can work in California."

Cerritos College, which partners with Michigan-based Northwood University to offer bachelor's degrees in business administration and in automotive marketing management, with students completing three years at the community college cost and the fourth at Northwood's cost, had wanted to include its nursing program under SB 850, but can't under the provision that bars community colleges from offering the same degrees as CSU or UC, Lacy said.

KEEPING STUDENTS IN CALIFORNIA

Lacy said SB 850 is needed, in part, to keep university-bound students in California. CSU Chancellor Timothy P. White said recently that because of the state's budget constraints, the system has experienced a 12 percent increase in applications and turned away more than 25,000 fully eligible students over the past two years.

"We've had a real problem when we've had transfer-ready CSU and UC students, and we've forced them out to out-of-state universities and institutions," Lacy said.

In the San Diego Community College District, where top officials support SB 850, administrators have considered health information technology, automotive tech

management and advanced manufacturing, among others, as potential four-year degree offerings, if the bill is signed into law.

"The public universities either do not offer bachelor's degrees in these fields, or are impacted to such an extent they cannot comply or provide access to enormous student demands," said district Chancellor Constance Carroll.

Other community college officials are taking a wait-and-see approach to the pilot program.

"While Long Beach City College will not participate, I will be interested in the results of the program should it pass and be signed into law," said LBCC President Eloy Ortiz Oakley.

EARLIER ATTEMPTS

Block, a former president of the San Diego Community College District Board of Trustees, who is chair of the Senate budget subcommittee on education, has twice before introduced similar legislation.

As an assemblyman, he introduced AB 2400 in 2010, to authorize the San Diego, Grossmont-Cuyamaca and San Mateo County community college districts to establish four-year degree pilot programs, but the bill was held inactive in the Assembly's Committee on Higher Education. In 2011, AB 661 would have allowed Grossmont-Cuyamaca and the San Mateo districts to offer one baccalaureate pilot degree per campus, but the bill was held in the inactive file on the Assembly Floor.

Powers said it was an idea introduced in austere times, but with the proliferation of for-profit schools and many community colleges already granting certificates and two-year degrees in fields not offered by public four-year campuses, extending some of those degrees to the bachelor's level is a step in the right direction.

"I think the landscape is so different," Powers said.

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