

SNG-Community college 4-year degrees-7-28-14

Four-year degrees from two-year colleges?

By Jim Nowlan

For the past decade, College of DuPage president Bob Breuder has been pushing state lawmakers to allow two-year community colleges to offer four-year baccalaureate degrees in limited, technology-oriented fields.

Breuder makes a good case. Expect another push in the next session of the state legislature.

Since Joliet (IL) Junior College became the first such college in the nation in 1901, Illinois has been a leader in the community college movement.

When I was a legislator in the late 1960s, public two-year colleges had dotted the mushrooming suburbs and major downstate cities, covering the whole state.

Today there are 39 community college districts and 48 campuses, enrolling 42 percent of all higher education students in the state, public and private.

The two-year colleges have advantages over the older, more traditional colleges and universities. First, they located in population-dense markets, while many small colleges constructed their “Old Main” a century earlier in frontier cities that never grew.

Second, in addition to tuition and state support, the two-year colleges have the local property tax, which generates big dollars, especially in affluent suburbs such as those in DuPage County.

As a result, tuition costs at community colleges are about one-third those of public universities and as little as one-tenth that at some private colleges. Tuition for a full-time year of study at a community college is about \$3,500 versus \$10,000-\$14,000 at a public university.

And further, room and board can often be saved by living at home.

In recent years I have taken a couple of for-credit courses at Black Hawk College in Kewanee, and the instruction was excellent and personal.

Higher education in Illinois is in flux. State support for higher education has been falling in real dollar terms, and tuition has been going up rapidly as a result.

The state's program of providing financial assistance to needy students has been flat-funded for years, so while 370,000 were eligible for need-based grants in 2012, 145,000 were left without grants.

All of this makes community colleges more attractive as alternatives.

Take Breuder's College of DuPage, for example. Twenty-eight thousand students, more undergraduates than any campus other than the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, take courses in 90 certificate programs, associate degree offerings in 59 occupations, and opportunities to earn a four-year degree from cooperating four-year institutions without leaving the Glen Ellyn campus of COD.

With annual revenues of a quarter-billion dollars and \$407 million in net assets, COD is in good shape, to say the least.

And Breuder wants to take advantage of COD's strong position to offer low-cost, four-year degrees in fields like information technology, public safety management, advanced manufacturing, auto technology management and, especially, nursing.

Community colleges have long turned out RNs with two-year degrees, but leading hospitals and the national nurses' association want nurses to have their bachelor of science in nursing degrees.

“We have the experience, the expert staffing and facilities to offer quality programs in these areas,” says Breuder, adding that few other institutions are interested in such offerings.

The enterprising Breuder thinks the time is right, now that 22 other states have okayed four-year degrees at community colleges. “Why should Illinois be a laggard in this regard?” he wonders.

Breuder's past efforts have been thwarted by opposition from public universities, the federation of private colleges, and the Illinois Board of Higher Education. The IBHE criticized the 2009 push by Breuder for, among other things, failing to demonstrate need for the programs he wanted to offer.

Years ago I would have been supportive of this supply-demand, central planning approach of the IBHE, but today I am convinced the marketplace is a better arbiter of what is needed in higher education.

A “study group” of 12 community college presidents has been set up to evaluate the issue of four-year degrees. They came out of a recent meeting, not surprisingly, very positive about the idea.

Expect the study group to solicit support from the larger community college world and then introduce legislation in the spring of 2015.

As Breuder says, “The time is right for Illinois.” And I think he is right about that.