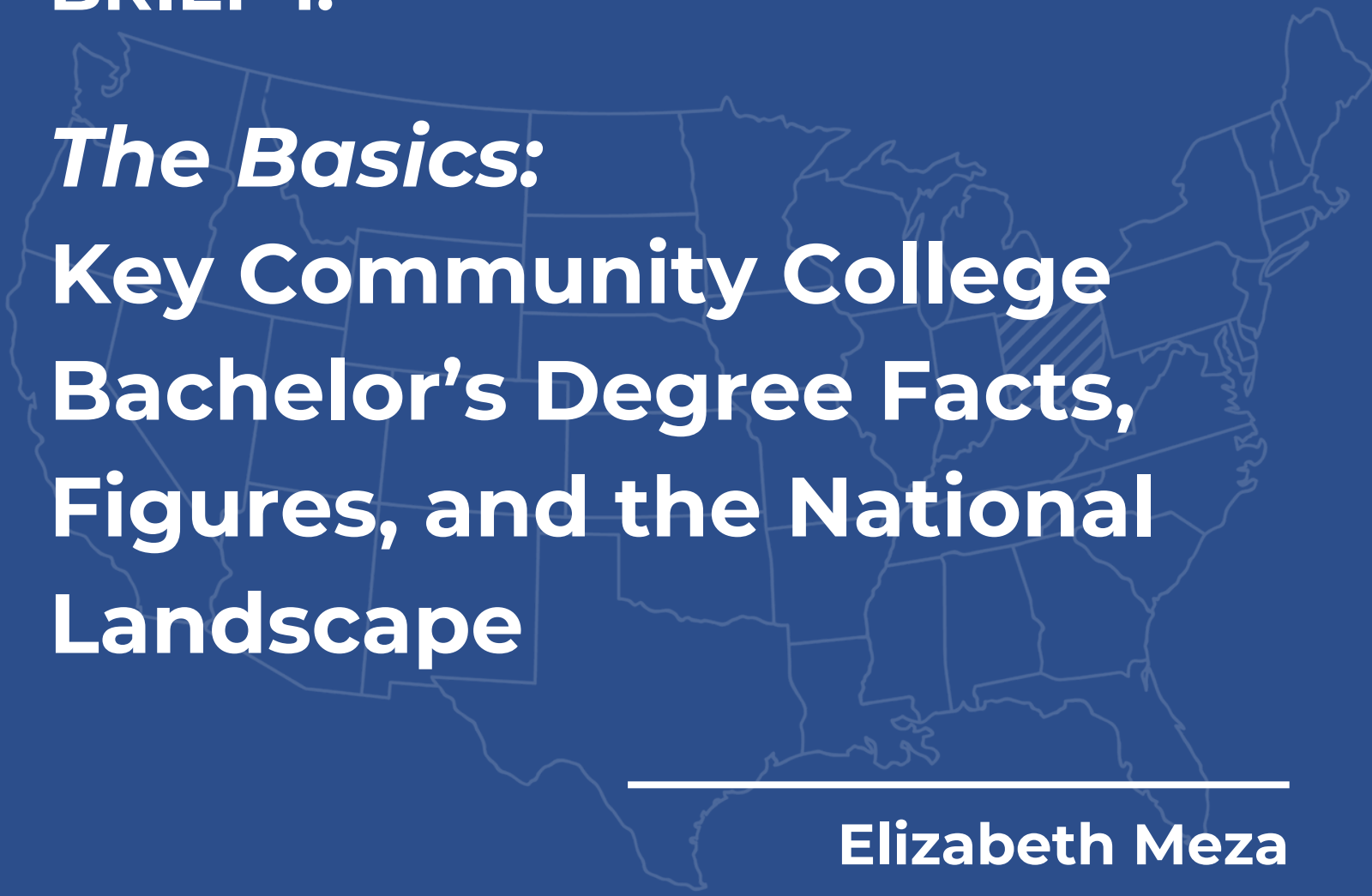
2026

The State Leadership Playbook for Planning and Implementing Community College Baccalaureate Degree Programs

BRIEF 1:

The Basics: Key Community College Bachelor's Degree Facts, Figures, and the National Landscape



Elizabeth Meza

University of Washington

UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON

bragg +associates

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About This Brief

As the first entry in The State Leadership Playbook for Planning and Implementing Community College Baccalaureate (CCB) Degree Programs, this brief answer two common CCB questions for state leaders:

1. **What should my state know about CCB degree scope, scale, and outcomes nationwide?**
2. **How are other states approaching the authorization and implementation of these degrees?**

Based on research conducted by our team, other researchers, and partnerships with practitioners, and in collaboration with Community College Baccalaureate Association, this brief provides an overview of many topics pertinent to state leaders, with more in-depth analysis coming in future briefs within this playbook.

The brief covers:

- The national landscape of community college bachelor's degrees
- An overview of students served by CCB degrees
- The affordability and geographic access of these degrees
- CCB degree outcomes
- Key recommendations for state leaders

Taken together, the brief points toward a model of CCB policy that is both broad in its authorization framework and supportive in its implementation, opening new doors for learners, especially adult learners, who have historically been left without affordable, accessible, or high-demand bachelor's degree options.

To start from the beginning, you can find the introduction to the CCB State Leadership Playbook here.

By the Numbers: Community College Baccalaureates Nationwide

Findings from Meza and Vo's (2026) CCB national program inventory provide by-the-number insights into the landscape of community college baccalaureate degrees in the country. This section synthesizes the findings into a just-in-time snapshot for state leaders, including data on states, institutions, programs, graduates, and degree types.

States

CCB degrees are authorized in 24 states. Expanding CCBs to more states typically requires changes in individual state's law(s) to allow community colleges to confer bachelor's degrees, and interest in expansion is growing as policy efforts take hold and evolve in more states. To illustrate, three new states — Illinois, Iowa, and New Jersey — introduced bills in the 2026 legislative session to authorize community college bachelor's degrees for the first time, and other states considered legislation that would allow for CCB expansion at more colleges and/or program areas.

24
states

24 states authorize the community college baccalaureate degree.
(Meza & Vo, 2026)

Non-Conferring States

In a recent poll of state leaders from the 26 non-conferring states, respondents from Kansas, Maine, Mississippi, Montana, New York, Vermont, and Virginia, among others, anticipated that their states would not pursue CCB degrees at the present time, although some respondents expressed interest in learning more about CCB degrees. Numerous respondents noted their states were not focused on CCBs but were working to actively strengthen transfer policies and partnerships, seemingly seeing their state's interest in community college bachelor's degrees relative to transfer commitments (Meza & Vo, 2026).

214

There are 214 public community colleges offering CCB degrees.
(Meza & Vo, 2026)

763
CCB programs

There are 763 CCB programs, with the highest number of programs offered in business and health professions, including nursing.
(Meza & Vo, 2026)

Institutions and Programs

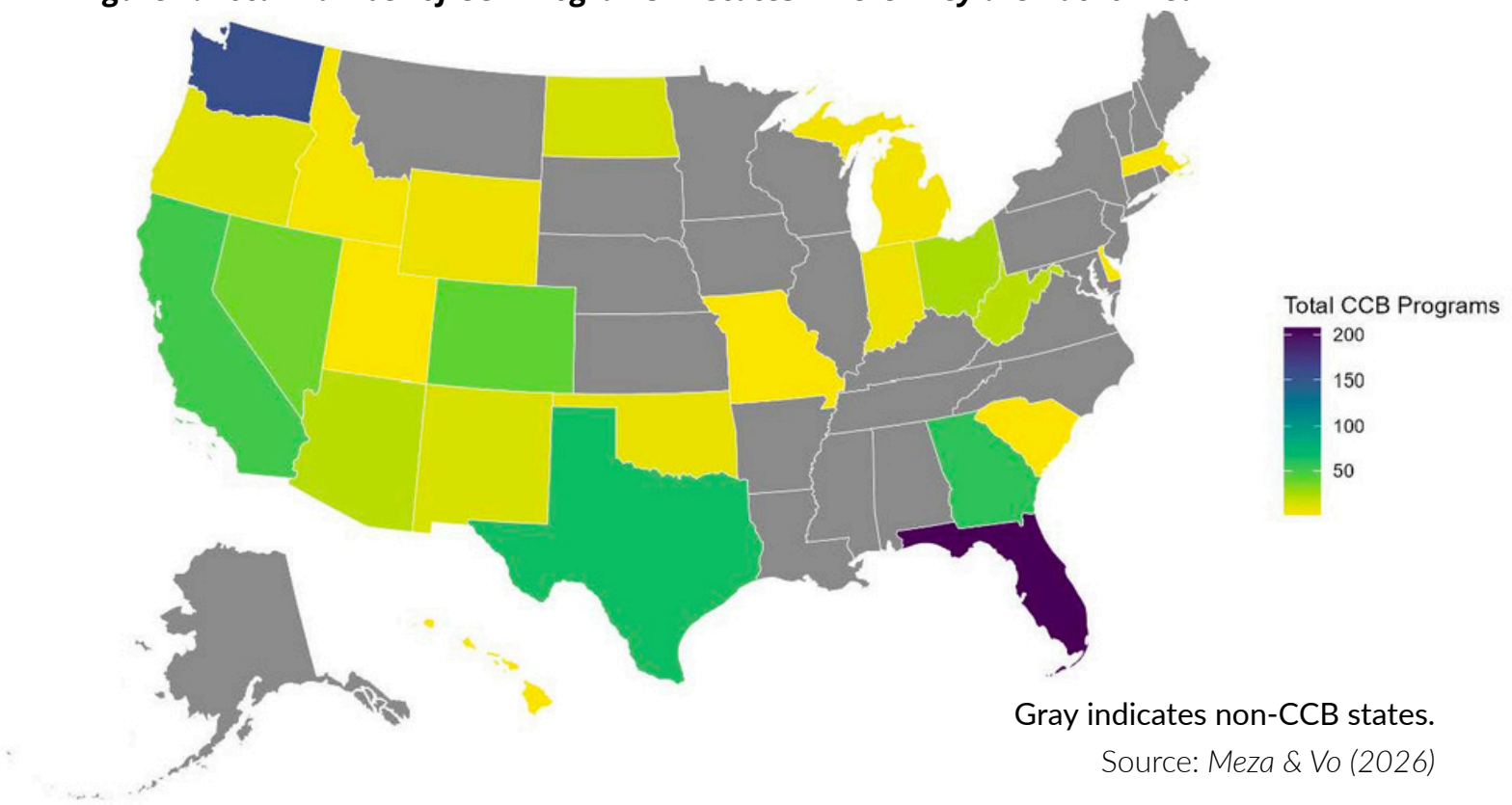
Across the 24 conferring states, 214 public, predominantly associate degree-granting institutions have been approved to offer one or more CCB programs, as of December 31, 2025.

Nationwide, there are 763 CCB programs offered, with the highest number of programs offered in business and health fields. Figure 1 shows the number of programs offered within each of the 24 conferring states. Florida and Washington, which authorize all community colleges to offer CCBs, have the largest number of programs. Other states, like California, Colorado, Ohio, Oregon, and Texas, continue to add programs. Four states — Delaware, Florida, Nevada, and Washington — offer at least one CCB degree program at every community college in the state, noting that the state of Delaware is a single community and technical college system. Overall, about 23% of community colleges in the country offer at least one bachelor's degree program.

However, of the 24 authorizing states, 10 of these states only allow CCBs in limited program areas or at certain institutions. Across all 24 states, the national average of CCB degree programs per college where they are offered is 3.6 (Meza & Vo, 2026).

Overall, about 23% of community colleges in the country offer at least one bachelor's degree program.

Figure 1. Total Number of CCB Programs in States Where They are Authorized



Gray indicates non-CCB states.

Source: *Meza & Vo (2026)*

Graduates

While growing, CCB degree programs are still only a small part of the educational offerings at community colleges. While over 16,000 students graduated with a CCB in 2023-2024, these students account for only about 1% of graduates nationwide (Meza & Vo, 2026). This percentage will grow as program implementation deepens and the number of CCB students move toward graduation and complete bachelor's degrees.

16,000

CCB Graduates

in 2023-2024

(Meza & Vo, 2026)

Degree Types

Across the country, the majority of CCB degrees come in the form of a Bachelor's of Applied Science or Arts degree (BAS or BAA), representing 46% of all CCB degrees, followed by a Bachelor of Science at 32% and Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) at 11% (Meza & Vo, 2026).

As of December 31, 2025, the most common program areas for CCB degrees are health professions, including nursing, with 205 CCB programs nationally. This is followed by business, with 141 programs nationally. A relatively small percentage of programs approved to offer these degrees but have ultimately closed or have not been implemented due to changes at the college, under-enrollment, or shifts in the local labor market (Meza & Vo, 2026).

Community college baccalaureate programs focus on rapidly growing industry sectors, and these programs are intentionally designed to align with labor market demand and address workforce shortages in high-need fields (Floyd et al., 2012). Demonstrating the workforce need for employees with baccalaureate-level qualifications is a requirement in most states for the approval of new CCB programs (Bragg, 2025) and is also important to ensure new CCB degrees yield good jobs with career mobility for graduates (Vo & Rios-Aquilar, 2025).

Community college bachelor's programs serve a different population of students than four-year universities predominated by traditional-age learners.

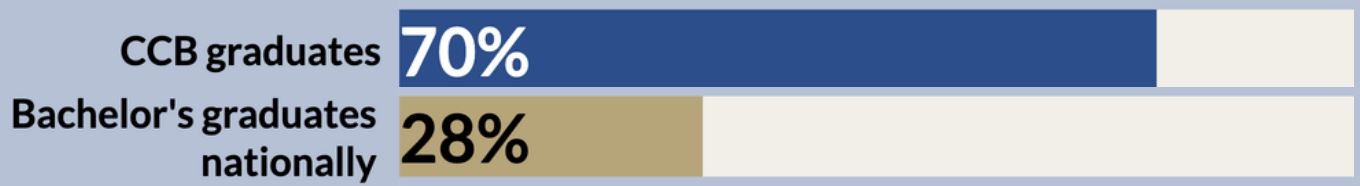
Students

Meza and Vo's national inventory also provides the most compelling evidence yet that community college bachelor's programs serve a different population of students than four-year universities predominated by traditional-age learners.

Comparing CCB graduates with all Title IV graduates nationally, CCB graduates are more diverse in terms of racial and ethnic identity, with 40% identifying as African American/Black or Latine, compared to only 26% of all bachelor's graduates nationally. Over half of the 214 public community colleges (58%) that confer bachelor's degrees are Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), compared to only 16% of Title IV institutions nationally (Meza & Vo, 2026).

Earlier research has found that many CCB students are diverse in other ways as well. For example, 70% of community college bachelor's graduates are "adult learners" ages 25 or older, compared to only 28% of bachelor's degree programs nationwide (Figure 2). CCB students are also more likely than traditional college students to be veterans, have dependents, and receive need-based financial aid (Meza, 2019).

Figure 2: Adult Learners Ages 25 and Older in CCB Programs Versus Bachelors' Graduates Nationally



Affordability

Earning a bachelor's degree from a community college is relatively affordable and allows students to stay close to home. Tuition and fees average $5,417 annually, compared to $10,022 at public four-year institutions (Meza, 2025) (Figure 3).

However, college costs are much more than just tuition and fees. In states where data is available, CCB students pay an average net price — that is, total cost of attendance minus financial aid — of $8,195 per year, compared to $14,190 at public universities, representing a 42% reduction in actual costs (Meza, 2025) (Figure 3). Whereas lower tuition is a major reason for greater affordability, so is offering programs where students already live and work, effectively lowering net price.

Figure 3: Average Annual Tuition and Fees Nationwide

$5,417 Community Colleges Conferring Bachelor's Degrees	**$10,022** Public 4-Year Institutions Conferring Bachelor's Degrees	**$19,000+** Private For-Profit Institutions Conferring Bachelor's Degrees

Geographic Access

CCB degrees may help to alleviate "bachelor's deserts" that impact students who are unable to move to pursue a bachelor's degree program. Research finds that about 70% of the U.S. adult population live within a 50-mile, straight-line distance — about 70 driving miles — of a four-year "broad access" institution. By this measure, approximately 30% of U.S. adults do not have geographic access to a bachelor's degree at a four-year broad-access institution (Rosenboom & Blagg, 2018). For adults with work or family commitments, proximity to higher education could have a substantial effect on access to educational and career opportunities (Rosenboom & Blagg, 2018).

Little research to-date has been done specifically looking at how a CCB degree might help alleviate bachelor's deserts. More insights into bachelor's deserts and their connection to community college bachelor's degrees will be shared later in this playbook.

$10,000

more annually

CCB graduates in Florida earn $10,000 more annually when compared to associate degree graduates in a similar field.
(Love, 2020)

75-83%

employment rate

Studies from Florida and Washington show employment rates of 75–83% within a year of graduation for CCB students.
(Love, 2020; Meza & Bragg, 2022)

Degree Outcomes

Research on the completion rates of CCB students shows promising results, with completion rates comparable to those of transfer students (Meza & Love, 2022). Students also demonstrate high rates of employment; studies from Florida and Washington show employment rates between 75–83% within a year of graduation (Love, 2020; Meza & Bragg, 2022). Overall, broader, more well-established fields like business, nursing, allied health, and information technology demonstrate strong and durable graduation and employment outcomes (Meza & Bragg, 2022).

Data also suggest that CCB graduates' earnings are high. Graduates in Florida, where CCBs have been authorized since 2000 and are widespread, earn $10,000 more annually when compared to an associate degree in a similar field (Love, 2020). Another study that looked at a smaller number of graduates but in more states found that CCB grads earned between $4,000 and $9,000 more in earnings than associate degree graduates, depending on program areas (Acton, et al., 2026).

A different study comparing the earnings of four-year university graduates with CCB graduates in similar program areas found that CCB graduates often earned more than university graduates, although the difference in earnings lessened over time (Meza & Bragg, 2022).

Going further, students emphasize positive outcomes of their CCB degrees beyond wage returns. In qualitative interviews, CCB students and graduates expressed pride in their career advancements, a greater sense of economic security for themselves and their families, and deeper engagement in community and public service, which they found personally satisfying (Bragg, 2025; Meza & Bragg, 2025).

Taken together, research on CCB graduate outcomes, including employment rates, wage gains, and other net effects, are strong and positive.

Recommendations

The research presented in this brief holds three initial lessons for state leaders:

1. **State-level policy is a primary driver of scale.**
2. **Factors like affordability, geographic access, and student populations combine to make one of the strongest arguments for community college baccalaureate degrees.**
3. **States should not consider the community college bachelor's degree as a competitor to transfer and other emerging baccalaureate reforms.**

RECOMMENDATION 1

State-level policy is a primary driver of scale. States that have authorized all community colleges to offer CCB programs without meaningful caps on the number of programs per institution differ markedly in scale from states that have restricted authorization to only a few institutions and programs. These states are far less likely to have scaled up CCB degrees.

State leaders would do well to know what other states are doing, particularly states that have similar governance, funding, and curriculum structures. State leaders should deepen their understanding of CCB programs offerings across the country, including understanding program foci and the student populations that are completing programs. They should also dig into factors that may impede CCB advancement, understanding which factors are likely dealbreakers in their state and which can be overcome with research and deliberation. Doing so will prepare state leaders to develop strategies to implement degrees at scale.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Factors like affordability, geographic access, and student populations combine to make one of the strongest arguments for CCB degrees. The cost savings of CCB degrees are significant, creating viable programs that reach students who may not feasibly pursue a bachelor's degree otherwise. Research shows cost concerns are multiplied when students live farther from campus, adding time, cost, and personal burden to attendance. Even in urban areas with nearby four-year institutions, capacity constraints in high-demand fields like nursing and engineering mean that proximity alone does not guarantee access. Issues of affordability and geographic access are further conflated when considering the student populations CCBs serve: Students in CCB programs are older, more likely to have dependents, and less likely to follow traditional transfer pathways than students at four-year institutions.

Taken together, these factors are crucial for making the case for CCB degree programs. Integrating evidence related to affordability, geographic access, and student populations can aid case-making efforts, demonstrating that they serve a student population that other pathways largely miss.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Further considering CCB student populations, states should not consider the community college bachelor's degree as a competitor to transfer and other emerging baccalaureate reforms. While some states have deprioritized CCB expansion in favor of strengthening transfer pathways, the data suggests that CCBs, transfer, and emerging reforms like three-year degrees need not be competing priorities. This is especially true when taking into consideration the population of students CCBs serve.

Considering this, state leaders should not consider CCBs a threat to other degree structures, instead pursuing advancement across varied approaches to baccalaureate attainment, recognizing that choosing one over the other leaves a distinct population of students — along with their economic and civic contributions to the state — behind.

Takeaways

These lessons point toward a model of CCB policy that is both broad in its authorization framework and supportive in its implementation infrastructure. By allowing community colleges to offer and expand community college bachelor's degrees in areas of workforce demand — particularly where they already have proven associate degree programs and broad student interest — states can expand access, keep costs down for students, and meet employers where they are, all while opening new doors for learners, especially adult learners, who have historically been left without affordable, accessible, or high-demand bachelor's degree options.

About the Authors

Dr. Elizabeth Meza is a distinguished researcher and faculty instructor at the Evans School of Public Policy at the University of Washington and a UW Public Impact Research Fellow. A former community college faculty member and administrator, Elizabeth regularly publishes and speaks on community college baccalaureate degrees and STEM transfer education. Dr. Meza received a Ph.D. from the University of Washington and a M.S. degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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