

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Malcolm Grothe for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education presented on September 29, 2009.

Title: The Community College Applied Baccalaureate Degree: Employers' and Graduates' Perspectives

Abstract approved: _____

George Copa

The purpose of this study was to better understand the perceptions of employers and graduates regarding the applied baccalaureate degree when conferred by community colleges. By better understanding the perceptions of employers and graduates, community colleges considering offering applied baccalaureate degrees will have some context within which to begin communicating with local businesses – as well as prospective students of ACCBD programs – in order to ascertain their support or lack of support for the new degree.

Within the interpretive methodology, the method of grounded theory was used to develop a step-by-step process to collect, sort, evaluate, and analyze the data used in this study. Two research questions were used as a framework to guide the proposed research study: (1) How do employers view the applied baccalaureate when conferred by community colleges? And, (2) How do graduates who have earned a community

college baccalaureate degree view the degree? Three colleges across North America were selected and employers and graduates were interviewed. The data collected resulted in seven themes and a proposed theory. The two research questions created a structure to investigate the ACCBD programs' strengths and weaknesses through the perspective of both the graduates and the employers of the graduates. Five themes emerged from the graduate interviews involving: (1) barriers that existed in continuing their education, (2) accommodating programs, (3) how the program prepared graduates for additional education, (4) alternative delivery modes of education, (5) education that appropriately prepared graduates for work. Two major themes emerged from the employer interviews: (1) graduates of ACCBD programs were prepared for employment, and (2) the ACCBD program strengthened the economic development of the community in which it was offered. From the themes, a proposed theory was developed to synthesize the common experiences of the study participants and provide others with a possible framework from which to plan and evaluate the ACCBD program. This proposed theory is a process with five stages: (1) student demand, (2) employer demand, (3) community college mission, (4) appropriate ACCBD program development, and (5) closing the loop to build a strong community.

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The Community College Applied Baccalaureate Degree:
Employers' and Graduates' Perspectives

by
Malcolm Grothe

A DISSERTATION

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Education

Dean of the College of Education

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

Malcolm Grothe, Author

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DEDICATION

To Katie.

The Community College Applied Baccalaureate Degree: Employers' and Graduates' Perspectives

CHAPTER I

FOCUS AND SIGNIFICANCE

There is an alarming nationwide trend of fewer students transferring to baccalaureate institutions according to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2008). And, due to the new world economy, this necessitates an immediate response by community colleges and universities to meet the demands for baccalaureate graduates (Walker & Floyd, 2005). Walker and Floyd noted, "Employers are asking educators to be responsive to this changing economy and to work with them to provide the appropriate workforce" (p. 95). As community colleges continue to adapt to meet these economic challenges, many colleges are adding the option of the "workforce" or "applied" baccalaureate degree.

In response to this trend, the AACC and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) have teamed up with a grant from the Lumina Foundation for Education to improve access to baccalaureate degrees. Their report, *Improving Access to the Baccalaureate*, stated, "Disproportionately affected are the most vulnerable members of our society who already face significant financial and social challenges" (American Association of Community Colleges & American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2008, p. vii). The need for attention to the issue of baccalaureate attainment is further supported by the following statement:

Although impediments to learning exist at many levels in the U.S. education system, they are of increasing concern in the transition from two-year to four-year institutions. Almost half of all undergraduates who attend college – including the majority of first-generation and minority

students – attend one of the nation’s community colleges. Of that number, close to half declare attaining a bachelor’s degree as their goal, yet only an estimated quarter of those students manage to achieve transfer to a bachelor’s level programs. (American Association of Community Colleges & American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2008, p. vii)

The report described community college-based baccalaureates as one of the potential strategies designed to alleviate this propensity to not acquire a baccalaureate degree. At the international level, the United States and Canada, in some states and provinces, have changed their laws (Floyd & Skolnik, 2005) to improve baccalaureate access by allowing community colleges to confer bachelor degrees.

By 1995, as one of the early adopters of the community college baccalaureate degrees, five British Columbia community colleges began offering baccalaureate degrees in order to improve access to these degrees (Skolnik, 2005). By 2003, three of Canada’s provinces – British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario – had authorized community colleges to offer or confer baccalaureate degrees. In the United States, several states have begun to allow community colleges to offer or confer baccalaureate degrees; these states include Florida, Utah, Texas, Arkansas, Hawaii, Montana, and Nevada (Floyd, 2005). Several states are in the process of working with their legislators to offer or confer baccalaureate degrees, Washington being one of the more recent states to gain approval

The state of Washington has changed its state laws in order to allow community colleges to offer or confer applied baccalaureate degrees. The Washington State Higher Education Coordinating Board’s (HECB) strategic plan for 2004 (Washington State HEC Board, 2004) noted several issues relevant to two-year colleges offering baccalaureate degrees. According to the report, transfer students routinely require five to ten percent more classes than students who begin their studies at a traditional baccalaureate

institution. The same report noted that Washington was very good at producing graduates with two-year degrees, ranking sixth in the nation as a percentage of the population. However, that does not translate into a robust percentage of four-year degrees. In fact, just the opposite is true; according to the same report, Washington was 33rd among states in the percentage of bachelor degrees earned. Washington was one of the top states at delivering associate degrees but was far below the national average for four-year degrees delivered. Further limitation to access came as a result of the two major Washington universities limiting enrollment (Chan, 2003). According to a recent article in the *Seattle Times*, the University of Washington, "has taken the drastic step of closing its doors to new students who want to start classes this spring" (Perry, 2009), continuing to limit access to baccalaureate degrees. At the same time, business and industry in Washington were calling for more students with four-year degrees.

According to Walker and Floyd (2005), "Community colleges have a rich history of responsiveness to their communities. Meeting the growing demands by students and employers for a higher level of workforce-related knowledge and skill is a logical next step for community colleges" (p. 101). Several states, such as South Carolina, Maryland, and Arizona, have passed legislation involving the community college baccalaureate degree (Floyd, 2005) but have not yet implemented the option.

As community colleges begin to confer baccalaureate degrees, an important consideration should be to find out what employers think about the quality of those degrees. According to Skolnik and Floyd (2005), "The jury is still out on how employers will regard these new degrees" (p. 196). In addition, Skolnik and Floyd stated, "The idea of community colleges offering baccalaureate degrees is relatively new and novel, and it

is thus important that research be undertaken to document and analyze the workforce experience of graduates of these programs” (p. 196). These statements make it clear that further investigation of employers’ (as well as graduates’) perceptions of the applied community college baccalaureate degree (ACCBD) is an important and timely endeavor.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand the perceptions of employers and graduates regarding the applied baccalaureate degree when conferred by community colleges. By better understanding the perceptions of employers and graduates, community colleges considering offering applied baccalaureate degrees will have some context within which to begin communicating with local businesses – as well as graduates of ACCBD programs – in order to ascertain their support or lack of support for the new degree.

Research Questions

Two research questions were used as a framework to guide the proposed research study:

1. How do employers view the applied baccalaureate when conferred by community colleges?

This question was designed to ascertain the familiarity of employers with the applied baccalaureate degree and with graduates who have earned the degree. It also explored the differences between employers, based on their familiarity with community colleges and applied baccalaureate degrees, when interpreting the response to follow-up questions. For example, would employers who seemed to be very familiar with the degree see more benefits or more limitations? Would employers say there was a

difference between graduates who completed a baccalaureate degree from a university versus a community college baccalaureate degree? Would employers have job descriptions that distinguish in detail the kind of degree required for the job?

2. How do graduates who have earned a community college baccalaureate degree view the degree?

This question was designed to identify common themes from the perspective of the program graduate. Some questions led to further inquiries such as: Do graduates feel the degree had improved their chances for success in their chosen field? Do they believe their employer valued the degree? Why did they select this degree?

Significance

There were four primary tenets supporting the significance of this study. First, the local, state, and national economic impact of increased educational opportunities for technical workers was an important factor. Second, whether employers were unwilling to hire graduates from ACCBD programs, it would not be worthwhile for states that are currently contemplating this degree to continue moving forward with the approval process. Third, the paucity of data presently available regarding employer perceptions of community college applied baccalaureates indicated that more research was warranted. Fourth, accrediting agencies were also interested in graduate and employer perspectives in terms of program assessment.

In addition to the reasons presented above, this subject held personal significance for me. My final project in my master's program was focused on career path development and connections to higher education from the business and industry perspective. While working for the Boeing Company, I was able to implement the career path models that I

had developed. I have also worked extensively on improving the transfer of technical associate degrees in my current job as the executive dean of technical education at a community college, and I was instrumental in developing an on-site baccalaureate degree for technical programs. From 2005-2006, I was the lead person to develop a proposal for our college (South Seattle Community College, 2006) to confer an applied baccalaureate degree in hospitality management. I have continued to lead the effort and South Seattle Community College graduated its first ACCBD class in Spring of 2009.

Prior to beginning this study, the purpose of the study was discussed with Dr. Kenneth P. Walker, President of the Community College Baccalaureate Association in a phone conversation (personal communication, February 13, 2006). Dr. Walker talked about the reality of critics of the community college baccalaureate degree who point to the fact that little was known about industry's thoughts about this new degree option. He continued, saying, "[This study] will answer a significant question that we need to know."

Economic Impact of Increased Educational Opportunity

At the international level, the world economy is becoming more dependent on knowledge-based business. According to Walker and Floyd (2005), this new, rapidly changing economy will require employers to work with community colleges to meet their needs in a timely manner. The Washington State HECB's 2004 strategic Interim Plan had two goals: first to "respond to the state's economic needs," and second, to increase the number of people who attain a baccalaureate degree. The report continued by stating that income level is directly linked to level of education attained. According to the 2000 U.S. Census (Washington State HEC Board, 2004), workers with a two-year degree make on

average \$25,000 annually, while workers with a four-year degree make on average \$33,000 annually, a 32% increase. This economic issue is driving many of the applied baccalaureate degree developments (Community College Baccalaureate Association, 2005a). By 2003, three of Canada's provinces, British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario, had authorized community colleges to offer or confer baccalaureate degrees, and nearly 25% of all Canadian community colleges now confer baccalaureate degrees. In the United States, as mentioned above, several states now have community colleges baccalaureate degrees; these states include Florida, Utah, Texas, Arkansas, Hawaii, Montana, and Nevada (Floyd, 2005), and more recently, Washington. The economic impact was clearly an important factor when considering an applied baccalaureate and was inextricably linked to the needs of the employer. As employers are able to increase profit with better skilled workers, they are able to share those profits by increasing salaries, which benefit the workers as well as the local economy with increased spending and tax revenue.

Responding to Industry Needs

The second point regarding business and industry support for the community college applied baccalaureate degree is that it is significant to government leaders because they are very sensitive to business needs. Information about employers' support or lack of support would be important in developing any kind of sensible plan to allocate state funds to community colleges to confer baccalaureate degrees. According to Walker and Floyd (2005), the 2002 Florida Board of Education noted, "The degrees proposed must meet an identified unmet need in the workforce" (p. 99). Three Texas community colleges that are offering community college baccalaureate degrees had a similar mandate

to meet unmet workforce needs (Wertheimer, 2003, as cited in Walker & Floyd, 2005). The Hawaii community college system has also been authorized to offer baccalaureate degrees in workforce areas (Patton, 2003, as cited in Walker & Floyd, 2005). Further, in Canada, according to Laden (2005, p. 156), “Dianne Cunningham, Conservative Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities, declared that there was a need to ‘develop a postsecondary education vision that provided a knowledgeable and skilled workforce necessary to advance Ontario’s competitiveness in the global economy’” (ACCAATO, 1999). This statement was the basis for Ontario piloting applied baccalaureate degrees at community colleges.

Lack of Previous Research

The third point that was very central to this research was the lack of information regarding employer and graduate perceptions of the applied community college baccalaureate degree (ACCBD). The Community College Baccalaureate Association’s web site (2005a) has nearly 70 articles associated with this new trend; yet, none of them is specifically focused on employers’ or graduates perceptions. Many of these articles addressed the subject and discussed the importance of industry buy-in in terms of the success of a program. Other searches, including Dissertation Abstract and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), turned up little information on employer or graduate perceptions of this degree. While describing issues for further investigation and research, Skolnik (2005) queried, “How strong is demand by employers for applied graduates in technical fields, and what are the longer-term prospects for such graduates?” (p. 70). In a telephone conversation with Michael Skolnik (personal communication, February 22, 2006), when asked about the significance for employer and graduate

perceptions, he stated, “It’s really important as the reason that these degrees were developed was to meet the workforce needs.” Skolnik and Floyd (2005) described the need for further workforce research by stating, “The idea of community colleges offering baccalaureate degrees is relatively new and novel and is thus important that research be undertaken to document and analyze the workforce experience of graduates of these programs” (p. 196). These statements made it clear that further investigation of employer perceptions of the ACCBD degree was an important and timely endeavor.

While searching the Oregon State University (OSU) Valley Library, Seattle University Library, and the ERIC database, I found one dissertation regarding a community college applied baccalaureate degree. This dissertation had devoted one chapter to employer perceptions (McKee, 2001). The chapter primarily documented the employers involvement with the college and not the perceptions of graduates working at the company. In addition, prior to beginning this study, I attended two conferences of the Community College Baccalaureate Association: one in 2004 in San Francisco, and the other in 2005 in New York City, and, again, little information was available regarding the employer and graduate perspective on the applied baccalaureate degree. The call for further research regarding employer and graduate perspective, along with the lack of research due to the newness of the ACCBD degree, made a strong case for researching employers and graduates perspectives.

Personal Experience

Finally, in my own personal experience as a technical recruiter for the Boeing Company, I found it very interesting that the technical requirements for the job required a two-year technical degree, but the managers wanted people who had a four-year degree.

In many cases while recruiting at community colleges, I found people who had completed a four-year degree and had then gone to a community or technical college to earn a two-year technical degree. They had returned to a community or technical college in order to get a job which their baccalaureate degree in history or political science, for example, would not help them attain. Boeing management highly preferred the applicants with both degrees, and these applicants often got the first job offers.

My master's project was designing career paths for Boeing technical employees to earn a bachelor degree. My personal experience attaining a two-year applied degree and then deciding to take the next step to earn a baccalaureate degree also supported the literature. Before I was able to transfer, I had to earn nearly 160 quarter credits at the community college, which was an excessive amount of lower division credit. In my current position as a dean of technical education at a community college, I have worked to help students transfer by developing articulation agreements with four-year schools and offering associate of applied science transfer degrees that are designed to improve transferability of the technical associate degree. Over the past 25 years, I have been involved in some way with this process. For the first 10 years, my own experience earning a technical two-year degree was followed by frustration when trying to earn a baccalaureate degree and finding that many of the credits I had earned did not transfer. For the past 15 years of my professional life, I have worked both in graduate school and on the job to clarify and streamline the process of moving students from a two-year technical degree to a baccalaureate degree.

Accreditation

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) is responsible for accrediting universities and colleges in the northwest region of the United States. Under Policy 2.2, Educational Assessment (NWCCU, 2006), suggestions for colleges to assess their programs are described. Item g., Employer/Employment Satisfaction Measures, stated the following:

One relatively straightforward outcomes measure used by some institutions concerns that number and/or percentage of former students who have sought and found employment. Are they happy with what they have found? Do they think the program prepared them well for their chosen occupations? If trained in a particular area, teacher education, for example, have they found a teaching position? (p. 39)

In addition to the opportunity to use graduate feedback to help assess programs, NWCCU also described employer feedback as a potential source for qualitative information to assess programs. The following quote is also from Policy 2.2 in NWCCU's Educational Assessment:

Other institutions have found qualitative comments of frequent employers to be particularly helpful in assessing educational outcomes. Do the employers regularly recruit program graduates? Why or why not? How well do program graduates perform in comparison with graduates from other similar programs? Are there areas of the curriculum in which program graduates are particularly well prepared? Which areas? Why is preparation judged to be particularly good? Where are the weaknesses? Why? What is being done to provide remedial activity? (p. 39)

Understanding the perceptions of employers and graduates is clearly an important factor for the NWCCU, and therefore, also important to colleges and universities who would like to confer an ACCBD.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to better understand current perceptions of employers and graduates regarding the applied baccalaureate degree when conferred by community colleges. The following two questions were designed to explore the perceptions of graduates and employers.

1. How do employers view the applied baccalaureate when conferred by community colleges?
2. How do graduates who have earned a community college baccalaureate degree view the degree?

Asking these questions was important because little data has been collected on this topic to date, while interest in the ACCBD has grown. With more information, states and provinces will be better equipped to make decisions about what degrees to offer and how to involve employers in the decision-making process. In addition, potential ACCBD students will have more information upon which to base their educational and career path decisions. These decisions, if made correctly, will likely improve graduates' career opportunities. The next two sections describe in more detail what the ACCBD degree is and how this study was conducted.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The purpose of the literature review was to develop a context from which to examine the ACCBD degree. This literature review covered four major areas:

1. Mission of the community colleges as related to offering baccalaureate degrees on community college campuses
2. Types and strategies for the different models of community college baccalaureate degrees that are currently offered at community colleges
3. Implementation issues associated with community college baccalaureate degrees
4. Defining the purpose and features of the ACCBD when conferred by a community college

The first part reviews the mission of the community college system as it relates to offering baccalaureate degrees on community college campuses. The implications of increasing the scope of the community college system to accommodate four-year degrees are discussed. The history of the system is examined to glean any clues that may help forecast the future of the community college. The subject matter begins to narrow and develop a context to further confirm the importance of studying this issue. By better understanding the mission of the community college system, sound judgments can be made as to the appropriateness of adding community college baccalaureates to community college offerings.

In the second part of the review of literature, the types and strategies of community college baccalaureate degrees that are currently offered at community

colleges are examined. This part continues to narrow the focus of the literature review and looks at several models currently in operation. The review aims at understanding the spectrum of models being used and helps to provide a context for the final study topic. This section discusses how the degrees function, what their structure is, and who is currently offering them.

The third part of the review of related literature is an implementation of issues associated with community college baccalaureate degrees. The focus continues to narrow to specific issues. Some examples of issues include finance, accreditation, legislation, faculty credentials, and economic impact.

The final part of the review of related literature attempts to define the ACCBD and relate this degree to employers and emphasize their importance in making the decision to implement the degree. This part makes the connection to the purpose and significance of this study concerning employer and graduate perceptions of the community college applied baccalaureate degree. The intent of the research is to delve into the perceptions of businesses and graduates concerning the value of the degree and develop the next steps for further research.

The four parts of the literature review are designed in a linear fashion in order to pare down the information from a general description of this type of degree to specifically focus on businesses' and graduates' perceptions of the ACCBD.

As a preliminary note, very few studies exist on the topic of community college applied baccalaureate degrees. Much information has been gained through attending the 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008 annual conferences of the Community College Baccalaureate Association. In addition, in reference to my expertise with the community

college baccalaureate, the three organizations – Society of Nuclear Medicine, California Community College Nursing Association, and the Community College Resource Center – have consulted my services. Additionally, I have recently received a request to consult with the community college system in Oregon. I have also given presentations at the National Council for Workforce Education, the League of Innovation for Community Colleges, and at several Community College Baccalaureate Association conferences. I was also fortunate to participate as a doctoral intern with the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) while the state went through the process of adding community college baccalaureate degrees. Finally, I am currently the Executive Dean of one of Washington State’s applied community college baccalaureate degrees in Hospitality Management. The following is a comprehensive view of the literature to date related to this study.

Search Strategy

In this literature review, data was obtained from several sources, including databases, web sites, conversations with leaders in the field, and libraries at a number of schools. The databases and libraries consulted included ERIC and the dissertation abstracts and library catalogs at OSU, Seattle University, and University of Washington. The web sites searched included colleges, state governments, accreditation agencies, newspapers, associations (such as the American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], the Community College Resource Center, and the Community College Baccalaureate Association [CCBA]), along with numerous Google searches. Experts consulted included Dr. Kenneth Walker, who, in addition to being the president of both CCBA and Edison College in Florida, is the most published author in the community

college baccalaureate field. I also consulted with Dr. Michael Skolnik, who holds the William G. Davis Chair in Community College Leadership at the University of Toronto and has multiple publications in this field. In addition, I consulted with Dr. Debra Floyd, coauthor of *The Community College Baccalaureate*, and Dr. Loretta Seppenan, policy analyst at the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges [SBCTC] and the person who is ultimately responsible for the implementation of the applied community college baccalaureate degrees in Washington.

The primary sources of literature for this review came from the McKee (2001) dissertation, the CCBA web site, and the book, *The Community College Baccalaureate*, edited by Floyd, Skolnik, and Walker (2005). Saturation on literature sources was reached with regard to the applied community baccalaureate when it became apparent that additional searches did not produce any new data. Personal conversations with Drs. Floyd, Skolnik, and Walker all agreed that perceptions of employers was an important topic to study and that little information was available on the topic. Although much time could be spent in many related topics, little actual data was found, and this was also confirmed by Drs. Floyd, Skolnik, and Walker.

Mission of the Community Colleges

The emphasis of community colleges has been changing since the first community college opened in 1901 (Cohen & Brawer, 1989). In the beginning, community colleges focused on preparing students for entry to four-year schools. Over time, however, several other emphases were incorporated into the community college mission. Today, most community colleges, in addition to academic transfer, provide remedial education, professional/technical education, and community service education.

This section focuses on the concerns regarding how the ACCBD affects the community college mission, looking at both positive and negative aspects, while also addressing how the ACCBD relates to the primary objectives of community colleges.

Townsend (2005) described the ACCBD effect on the mission of the community college from both positive and negative perspectives. From a positive perspective, she noted that advocates of the community college feel community colleges can remain true to their original mission while adapting to the community college baccalaureate. Walker (2005) stated, “Expanding missions to include baccalaureate degrees without changing the open-door philosophy is a logical option. Missions should not reflect a bygone era but rather respond, adapt, and grow in ways appropriate to changing communities” (p. 15). Gonzales (2005), in a presentation to the Washington State Inter-College Relations Commission, noted that Great Basin College, a community college that has been offering community college baccalaureate degrees since 1999 (Remington & Remington, 2005), was preserving the community college mission by addressing the primary tenets of the college’s mission, noting that the baccalaureate was a subset of the mission, and that an open-door policy remained for students.

The concerns for the future of community colleges regarding the community college baccalaureate, according to Townsend (2005), included several questions yet unanswered. Some of the questions included:

1. Will community college presidents neglect other parts of the college in order to grow the baccalaureate?
2. Will funds be diverted to support the community college baccalaureate?

3. What about the differences between faculty who teach upper division courses versus those who are currently teaching in the institution?
4. What if the leadership changes?
5. How will the different accreditation agencies respond to this new degree?

Little actual research was available to answer these questions. Townsend (2005) described how some of the community colleges that have started to offer the community college baccalaureate morphed into four-year schools. As an example, Westark College, the college studied by McKee, is now the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith (McKee, 2005). Other examples included The University College of the Caribou, located in Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada, which as of 2005 is now known as the Thompson Rivers University (Thompson Rivers University, 2006). Kwantlen University College, also located in British Columbia, has now become Kwantlen Polytechnic University (Kwantlen Polytechnic University, 2009).

In an article by Lane (2003) regarding the concern of community colleges offering baccalaureate degrees, George Boggs, president of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), described his misgivings about community colleges offering baccalaureate degrees turning into universities. He stated that some community colleges, such as Utah State Valley College, were no longer paying their dues to the AACC because they had become four-year universities.

The official designation of colleges was driven by regional accreditation bodies; in the United States, two accreditation organizations were examined. The Northwest Commission on Colleges (NWCCU) has four designations: associate, bachelor, master, and doctorate. The colleges in this region are classified by the highest degree that they

offer (NWCCU, 2006). For example, in the case of a community college offering one baccalaureate degree, that college would need to meet all of the requirements of the bachelor level, and as such, would then be classified as a bachelor-level college. Another consortium of schools under the Commission on Colleges – Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) has the same classifications for associate- and bachelor-level institutions as NWCCU (SACS, 2006). St. Petersburg College in Florida is under the jurisdiction of SACS. Prior to 2001, it was St. Petersburg Junior College, but the name was changed through Senate Bill 1162 (2001) (Florida Legislature, 2006). The Florida legislation specified that “St. Petersburg College shall maintain the mission and policies of a Florida Community College, including the open-door admissions policy and the authority to offer all programs consistent with a public community college” (p. 69). An independent classification system exists within the 2005 edition of the Carnegie Classifications. This classification system has many categories and was used by researchers to determine different levels of higher education institution (Carnegie Classifications, 2009). Under the category “Associate Degree,” 1,685 colleges were listed under each of the major categories, and under the category “Associate Dominate,” 159 colleges were listed. Included in the Associate Dominate list were Great Basin College and St. Petersburg College. No colleges on the Associate Dominate list had the name “community” in their title. With regard to this, Dr. Ron Baker (personal communication, February 22, 2006), Executive Vice President of NWCCU, remarked, “NWCCU does not regulate the name of the college.”

An important question must be asked: Will the community college be a thing of the past and become four-year schools? Or, will they hold to open access and

comprehensive programming? At this point, there does not seem to be enough data to point to any trend, but some community colleges have held to their comprehensive mission while others have morphed into four-year universities. Finally, change is inevitable and change is happening in community colleges, as several states and three Canadian provinces have authorized community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees. This new trend is growing and there seems to be a lack of significant data in many pertinent areas. As such, this study was designed to provide data to help leaders make important decisions regarding what businesses and graduates would like to see in the community college applied baccalaureate degrees.

Types and Strategies of Community College Baccalaureate Degrees

This section of the literature review examines the different ways in which baccalaureate degrees are offered at community college campuses. In addition, the broad context of the community college mission is connected to the specific context of the baccalaureate degree when conferred by a community college.

Although community colleges offering baccalaureate degrees may seem new and somewhat radical, it may just be a new spin on an old tradition. In the 1830s, for example, “normal schools” as we know them today began to appear on the American higher education network (Townsend, 2005). These “normal schools” began as two-year colleges designed to train teachers for primary and secondary schools. As the demand for theory from teachers increased, the normal schools added a third and fourth year, and most, over time, became universities. This transition from normal schools to university somewhat parallels the phenomenon of today in which more and more community colleges are beginning to offer baccalaureate degrees.

McKee (2001) examined four partnership models for community college students to attain a baccalaureate while remaining on the community college campus: the university center, a distance education model, the multi-institutional consortium model, and the two-plus-two model. He also described a model that does not require a partnership in which the community college confers the baccalaureate degree. McKee's dissertation used grounded theory method and focused on a single community college baccalaureate program in Arkansas. Several key individuals, including a student, an instructor, a college administrator, an employer, an accreditation agency representative, and a state legislator were interviewed, and their responses to similar questions were recorded. Examples of the questions asked of the employer and the student were as follows.

The student was asked to respond to the following:

1. Please describe the process Westark College followed to create this unique baccalaureate program.
2. What was your involvement in this process?
3. Explain why you decided to enroll in this program.
4. Describe your experience as a Westark College student.
5. Please share your impressions about the quality of this program.

The employer was asked to respond to the following:

1. Please describe the process Westark College followed to create this unique baccalaureate program.
2. What was your involvement in this process?

3. Explain how your company is currently involved with the community college baccalaureate.
4. Describe how your company will benefit from the bachelor of manufacturing program at Westark College.
5. Please share your impressions about the quality of this program.

Similarly, this current study interviewed both employers and graduates of the ACCBD. In his dissertation, McKee (2001) also described the other baccalaureate approaches offered on community college campuses. University centers are made up of many different collaborative arrangements; four primary approaches exist according to McKee (2001): distance learning, multi-institutional consortium, two-plus-two partnerships, and a full-blown university center; the latter would be staffed by the university and be co-located on the two-year college campus.

McKee (2001) further explored an approach that does not require a partnership with a university. In this case, the community college conferred the baccalaureate degree. The focus of McKee's dissertation was the baccalaureate program offered at Westark College in Arkansas. In this approach, the two-year colleges essentially remained the same entity, with the addition of offering at least one baccalaureate degree that complemented their existing programs. For example, a college may offer a two-year technical degree in manufacturing and make the determination that a four-year degree in manufacturing was needed to complement the two-year degree. In some cases, a high-demand degree was identified in a geographic area, and the two-year colleges was requested to provide that degree due to the fact there were no universities in the area. One example of this approach is Florida's St. Petersburg College located in St.

Petersburg. Florida was ranked 47th in the nation (Mills, 2003) in number of baccalaureate degrees by percentage of population, thus compelling the state to recognize the need for such degrees. Florida Senate Bill 1162 stated (Florida Legislature, 2006, p. 1):

In addition to the certificates, diplomas, and degrees authorized in s.240.301, Florida Statutes, St. Petersburg College may offer selected baccalaureate degrees. Initially, the college may offer programs that lead to a baccalaureate degree in the following fields:

1. Bachelor of Science in Nursing. This program must be designed to articulate with the Associate in Science degree in nursing.
2. Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education.
3. Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science in Special Education.
4. Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science in Secondary Education.
5. Bachelor of Applied Science in fields selected by the Board of Trustees of St. Petersburg College.

The Board of Trustees shall base the selection on an analysis of workforce needs and opportunities in the following counties.... St. Petersburg College must offer a related Associate in Science or Associate in Applied Science degree program, and the baccalaureate degree level program must be designed to articulate fully with at least an Associate in Science degree program.

Community colleges conferring baccalaureate degree programs in New York, Utah, and Nevada were also discussed in McKee's literature review (2001). McKee described the university colleges in Canada that offer applied baccalaureate degrees as being similar to the U.S. community colleges offering the ACCBD. The university colleges had fundamentally retained their mission as a comprehensive postsecondary institution. They continued to offer limited English proficiency classes, adult basic education, two-year vocational technical degrees, as well as technical community college baccalaureate degrees. These university colleges have been offering the community college applied baccalaureate degrees for nearly 15 years, and thus, were in a good

position to assess employers' perception of the degree. Kwantlen University College (now Kwantlen Polytechnic University) in Surrey, just south of Vancouver, British Columbia, is one of these colleges. Kwantlen was authorized to offer baccalaureate degrees in 1995 (Skolnik, 2005). Kwantlen offers applied baccalaureate degrees in several areas and was one of the sites included in this present study.

Future research considerations mentioned by McKee (2001) included: (a) defining the community college baccalaureate, (b) cost considerations, (c) mission change of the community college, (d) access issues, and (e) economic development issues. This review of related literature has examined the mission change issues and begins to define the community college applied baccalaureate.

McKee (2001) made many salient points and was, in fact when beginning my study, one of the only dissertations found on this topic. The format was concise and understandable; the purpose, qualitative research methodology, and grounded theory method were clearly articulated. He covered the implementation of several community colleges offering baccalaureates in the U.S. as well as Canada. McKee used grounded theory to develop an analysis of the program at Westark College. He articulated three primary themes:

1. Community support: This study provided insights into community support by providing employer and graduate perspectives as both of these groups are integral parts of the community.
2. Alternative delivery model: This study focused on the very specific alternative delivery model of the ACCBD degree.
3. The baccalaureate degree itself.

This study was designed to complement McKee's research by adding breadth to his study. As such, the number of sites covered in this study was three. Also, this study sought to increase the depth of the data by narrowing the focus to the ACCBD and employer and graduate perspectives.

Kwantlen, Great Basin, and St. Petersburg College were visited for this study. As mentioned above, the dissertation by McKee (2001) was modeled, but with a wider focus. Again, three colleges were studied instead of one, to gain breadth, and to add depth to the study, the focus was narrowed by seeking only the perspectives of the graduates of the ACCBD program and the employers that had hired some of these graduates. The next part focuses on how these community college baccalaureate degrees, when conferred at the community college, were implemented and the importance of this factor in the development of this study.

Implementation Issues Associated with Community College Baccalaureate Degrees

This is a review of what is currently known about implementation issues with the community college baccalaureate degree. A number of areas are explored: finance, facilities, faculty, program development, quality, mission change, accreditation, agency certification, government approval, students, economic impact, and leadership. Although all of these issues were intertwined, they generally fit into two main categories: the approval process and practical and logistical aspects. The approval process includes state/province approval, accreditation agency approval, and institutional approval. The practical and logistical aspects include financing, facilities, faculty, program development, and employers.

A number of states —Utah, Nevada, Arkansas, Florida, Texas, and Hawaii— have authorized community colleges to confer baccalaureate degrees (Floyd & Skolnik, 2005; Townsend, 2005). In 2004, Indiana also began conferring baccalaureate degrees at community colleges (CCBA, 2005b). At about the same time, a technical college in South Carolina received legislative authorization to offer a four-year degree in culinary arts (CCBA, 2005a). Finally, in 2005, Washington also approved community colleges to confer baccalaureate degrees (Washington SBCTC, 2006). Other states have resisted this trend: Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon have all been unsuccessful in seeking state approval to offer these degrees. In Canada, Skolnik (2005) noted that three provinces—Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario—have authorized community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees.

Once the state or province had approved the degree, the next step was to attain approval from the accreditation agency in the region where the degree was to be offered. Ron Baker (2004), deputy director of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), at a presentation at the Community College Baccalaureate Association annual conference in San Francisco, stated that, from NWCCU's perspective, adding a baccalaureate degree to a community college would require a substantive change. This, indeed, was the case with Great Basin College under the jurisdiction of NWCCU – adding a baccalaureate degree required the college to apply for candidacy (Remington & Remington, 2005). If the baccalaureate degree required other certification from industry or other entities, such as the nursing commission, that also needed to be secured. In addition to approval from government and accreditation agencies, Remington and Remington (2005) described how the entire college was involved in the Great Basin

College plan to offer baccalaureate degrees – from the regents to the faculty and everyone in between. This is related to the first section in this chapter: dealing with college missions; once the college had decided to offer the baccalaureate degree, it would need to decide to what extent to revise the mission of the college. In most cases, at a minimum, the colleges changed their names by dropping the word “community.” Once approval from government, accrediting bodies, and the college itself had been secured, the next phase was dealing with the logistics of offering a baccalaureate degree.

Infrastructure considerations also needed to be reviewed (e.g., parking, cafeteria facilities, restrooms, special equipment, and classroom space). The faculty also needed to be considered: Would more faculty need to be hired (Townsend 2005). Would the upper division faculty be paid differently, and would different credentials be required? How would the program itself be developed? Laden (2005) noted that an important feature of program development was meeting industry needs: “In fact, the concept of niche programs that met industry needs was highlighted as what should be the distinctive feature of the colleges’ new degree” (p. 163).

My study provided data for this phase of the program development by gathering information from employers and graduates about these degrees. With regard to these practical considerations, a number of concerns were raised in this study. They included the potential need to change of mission of the community college, the ability of students to matriculate into a master’s program, and the need for these degrees in the workplace. This latter concern supported the need for this study with regard to employers and graduates experience in the job market.

Laden (2005) also described funding from both the college's and the students' perspective as critical to all aspects of the ACCBD. With regard to college funding, without first securing adequate funds, the ACCBD could undermine other parts of the college by draining funds from current program and activities, and she identified industry partners as being a good source to lend support to the program. With regard to the program's affordability, it was found that many employers were willing to provide a share of the students' tuitions, thus making a good case to state government and accrediting bodies that the college was meeting business and industry needs.

This study also collected data associated with both accreditation and logistics and helped to build upon the knowledge of the ACCBD programs through the eyes of graduates and employers. The next segment describes the "applied" community college baccalaureate degrees, which are specifically designed for use in the workplace.

The Purpose and Features of the Community College Applied Baccalaureate

This final section narrows the field even further to focus on the applied baccalaureate degrees conferred at community colleges. This was a difficult task due to the lack of relevant formal studies. In fact, in a number of areas, there have been no publications whatsoever (e.g., Alberta, Ontario) regarding the applied baccalaureate degree (Levin, 2002). In addition, Skolnik and Floyd (2005) noted the importance of differentiating between the applied baccalaureate degree and the traditional baccalaureate degree. To that end, as a part of this study, follow-up questions for both employers and graduates were used to gather data associated with the perceptions of differences between the university degree and the ACCBD degree. In spite of this lack of information, the following information about these new degrees was gathered before doing the study.

Walker (2005) described the difference between an applied and a traditional baccalaureate degree, noting that the applied degree uses applied and contextual learning; that is, courses taught in the environment of the worksite. For example, an accounting class offered to students in an applied baccalaureate degree program in fashion merchandizing might use examples directly related to the merchandizing industry. In order to teach students in an applied format, an accounting course might use unique software designed for the fashion merchandizing industry and be taught by instructors with accounting experience in the fashion merchandizing industry.

These degrees are also significantly connected to on-the-job learning; this could take place as an internship or a co-op learning experience. In some cases, the degrees have an inverted structure, with the technical component delivered first and later the upper division coursework consisting of general education and internships. The degree typically targets the local workforce environment and is tied to the economic conditions of a geographical area (Walker & Floyd, 2005). The degrees are often designed for students who are working in the industry they are studying while attending college; hence, the convenience of attending a local community college versus driving longer distances to a university. The design of these degrees takes into consideration the hours the student is working and the fact that these students are usually older and have family commitments. Walker (2005) further noted that Florida's Board of Education emphasized that the degrees proposed must meet the identified unmet need in the workforce. Laden (2005) made similar comments concerning the Ontario government requesting that the new degrees should be unique in meeting the unmet needs of industry. In a report, Call (1997) discussed applied baccalaureates in terms of removing barriers for students and

meeting the needs of employers by developing degrees that are sequenced and taught at a level appropriate for the needs of the student and the employers who hire them.

According to Laden (2005), the Ontario applied baccalaureate included a hands-on portion, about 20% liberal arts courses, and a significant internship that provided opportunity to apply theory and practice in the workplace. In most cases, although the actual definition of the applied baccalaureate might have been unclear or the same as for a traditional bachelor degree, they are all specifically designed to prepare people to enter into the workforce.

Skolnik and Floyd (2005) submitted that the results of these new community college degrees, in terms of employers' perceptions, were still unclear. Employers who hired students with associate degrees might feel that the students with baccalaureate degrees would be even better prepared for work than students with an applied two-year degree. However, due to the novelty of the degree, it was important to study the workforce experience of the graduates of these types of programs. Finding out what these graduates thought was part of my study.

Below are some examples of the descriptions of ACCBD degrees. Great Basin College's description of their Bachelor's of Applied Science in Land

Surveying/Geomatics (Great Basin College, 2006) is as follows:

This degree is aimed at those who are working in the field and who seek licensure as Professional Land Surveyors. The program will be offered to serve both full-time students in residence, or part-time students, including career professionals, who may be licensed or seeking licensure. Classes will be offered online and in the evenings. The program articulates with an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree in land surveying/geomatics from an accredited institution.

And below, St. Petersburg College's description of their Bachelor's of Applied Science in Technology Management (St. Petersburg College, 2006) was described:

St. Petersburg College has a Bachelor's degree in Technology Management within your grasp. If you can spare two nights a week plus some time to study, you can earn your degree in two years or less. SPC's Technology Management degree was designed for people just like you – those with full-time jobs, family responsibilities, and a desire to get ahead. So, what's keeping you from taking your next step up the career ladder?... The Technology Management curriculum can be customized to your needs. For instance, you can get full credit for relevant work experience. And the really good news is we accept almost all of your associate degree credits....

The description continues with a quote by Paul Wilcock who was the Vice President of Business Development and Strategy at TSI:

Your Technology Management program is timely and well grounded. Management training for fast-track technical personnel is very important. Your program helps motivate and retain highly skilled technicians. It lets them reach their fullest potential as they progress through their careers. We are honored to be a part of this program and welcome the opportunity to provide leading-edge technology training.

Both of these degree programs targeted working students and students with an AAS degree in a similar field. The Great Basin College example highlighted the fact that the degree prepared students for a professional license, and the St. Petersburg example used a quote from an employer to help describe the degree. Both degrees were offered at night, and Great Basin College offered an online component. Both these colleges were sites for this study of employer and graduate perceptions of the ACCBD degree.

This segment has further narrowed the broad view of the mission and types of community college baccalaureate degrees to include only those degrees conferred by a community college, and specifically the ACCBD and its connection to employers and graduates. The ACCBD has several common aspects, as noted in the literature and on

government and college web sites. First, they were offered at a community college; second, they were designed to meet the needs of the workforce and working students; and finally, there was little research regarding employers and graduate perceptions of the degrees. Canada is a leader in developing these degrees, especially British Columbia, which is the location of Kwantlen Polytechnic University, one of the three schools used in this study.

Summary

Several key features were derived from the literature review in order to develop the focus and the design for the proposed study. The purpose of this study was to better understand the perceptions of employers and graduates regarding the applied baccalaureate degree when conferred by community colleges. By better understanding the perceptions of employers and graduates, community colleges considering offering applied baccalaureate degrees will have some context within which to begin communicating with local businesses in order to enlist their support for the new degree.

The following implications drawn from the review of related literature helped to guide the focus of the proposed study:

- Very little data has been collected regarding employer and graduate perspectives on the ACCBD. This leaves decision makers, accreditation bodies, students, and industry with little information to determine the appropriateness and quality of the applied baccalaureate degree when conferred by a community college.

- The ACCBD is supposedly designed for students who have an AAS degree and are working and unable to attend a university. There is no research available to confirm this assumption.
- The ACCBD is supposedly designed specifically to be responsive to employers' needs and taught in applied formats. There is no research available to confirm this assumption.
- The ACCBD is a new trend in the United States and Canada, and some states and provinces are reluctant to introduce it into their jurisdiction. Having more information would help other states make informed decisions when considering offering ACCBD degrees.
- Employers may be asked to support the ACCBD degree with finances and other means of support. There is no research available for employers to make informed decisions regarding support for the ACCBD.

In addition to helping delineate the focus for this study, the literature review helped to guide the development of the design of the study. This study used interpretive methodology and grounded theory to focus on the meaning and perceptions held by employers and graduates about the ACCBD. The following summary statements based on this literature review indicated that this design approach explained in the next section, was best suited to conduct this study:

- The lack of longitudinal data restricts the design of the study with regard to some quantitative methods for which long-term data is required.
- The newness of the ACCBD restricts the number of graduates and employers available for a quantitative survey.

- The mission of the community colleges is a very subjective statement and well suited for interpretive study designed to examine the meaning and context within which the ACCBD is proposed.
- Since few colleges currently offer ACCBD degrees and even fewer have offered the degree for over 5 years, the literature review helped to identify potential colleges for this study and provided background information that was helpful in providing a context for a deeper understanding of the participants' responses.
- The newness of the ACCBD and lack of data supported using the grounded theory method in that there was no prior theory to build upon, and data collecting could then be adjusted during the collection process as greater understanding of the perspectives about the ACCBD emerged.

The purpose of this study was to better understand the perceptions of employers and graduates regarding the applied baccalaureate degree when conferred by community colleges. This study was designed to look at the perceptions of employers and graduates regarding the ACCBD and fill a gap that exists in this body of knowledge. This literature review was designed to draw out the issues associated with the ACCBD. These issues included the potential change to the community college mission as a result of offering these new degrees and the lack of empirical data available for decision makers to make good choices about offering these degrees. The information gathered during this study will benefit colleges, students, employers, and accreditation agencies. This study design developed themes and proposed theory that will help guide the future development of the ACCBD.

The next section presents the process used for collecting relevant data in order to develop a proposed theory based on employer and graduate perceptions. This proposed theory may provide useful data for colleges, government, employers, and accreditation agencies, as well as potential students needing to make informed decisions regarding the community college applied baccalaureate degree.

CHAPTER III

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

This section describes the process for using grounded theory method to conduct a study with an interpretative methodology. The methodology, method, data collection, data analysis, site selection, and participant selection are explained below.

Methodology and Rationale

The interpretive methodology foundational philosophers of science (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) believed that, in order to interpret people's actions, the social scientist must understand the context in which the action is taking place. According to Carr and Kemmis, "Actions, unlike the behavior of most objects, always embody the interpretations of the actor, and for this reason can only be understood by grasping the meanings that the actor assigns them" (p. 80). The interpretive researcher is looking for interpretation of action or understanding. Carr and Kemmis go on to describe interpretive studies as being designed with the goal of deepening insight by describing the following:

It (interpretive social science) aims to educate: to deepen insight and to enliven commitment. Its work is the transformation of consciousness, the differentiation of modes of awareness and the enlightenment of action. ...and it aims to contribute to social life through education the consciousness of individual actors. (p. 93)

Carr and Kemmis also describe the educational experience of individuals as contributing to social life as an additional attribute of interpretive social science. Interpretive study does not provide direct action with the finding, but may provide an indirect action through the individual actors.

According to both Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Bredo and Feinberg (1982), the following are important features in interpretive research:

- Seek a sensitive interpretive understanding (e.g., taking into consideration nuances and unique individual circumstances)
- Reveal meaning underlying social life (e.g., deeper understanding of social life and human affairs through more rational and authentic action)
- Reveal rules and assumptions (e.g., uncover actors interpretations of context)
- Expose context in a theoretical manner (e.g., provide new/improved language to explain actors actions)

The above features make it clear that the interpretive methodology (or philosophical perspective) was the most appropriate for this research project given its goal of attempting to understand the graduates and employers experience with and perceptions of the AACBD. Interpretive research also was well aligned with my personal paradigm as stated in the personal disclosure part of this report. For example, when I worked at Boeing, I was very technical and object oriented. I then transitioned to the service-oriented world of education and became more people orientated. As my career has transitioned from natural science to the more insight-orientated social science, it seems appropriate that my research should follow the social science of interpretive methodology. In order to understand the perceptions of employers and graduates, it was important to learn “what is meaningful or relevant to the people being studied” (Neuman, 2003, p. 76).

Interpretive research has strengths as noted above, but it also has some limitations. The ability to make generalizations or develop standards for evaluations is not possible with interpretive study. Also, unintended consequences may develop as a result of the social context, and if the individuals are unaware of the results, it cannot be

controlled or referenced by the individual. In addition, Carr and Kemmis (1986) go on to say, "... the interpretive approach tends to remain indifferent to the need for social theory to be critical of the status quo" (p. 98).

Interpretive social science studies are often evaluated for soundness and good evidence by study participants and others who are in similar situations as the study participants. In the case of this study, employers and graduates of the ACCBD were the study participants, and some of these participants reviewed the study for soundness. The processes used to ensure sound data, including credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness, will be further defined in the Strategies to Ensure Soundness of Findings section.

Personal Disclosure

Previously, I discussed my personal connection to this topic through my own experience as a student returning to a community college to earn a second two-year degree in order to transfer to a baccalaureate institution. This was an important factor in this interpretive study in that the person who is conducting the study needs to be clear about any prior perceptions that he or she might bring to the study. But, it is also very valuable that the researcher have some experience with the phenomenon under study.

In 1988, I took a month long solo trip to Europe to "find myself." During the trip, I reflected on my job at Boeing and my experience attending Highline Community College. I also contemplated the path my father had taken. He had started his career as a high school shop teacher and was lured away from this job by the comparatively large salary and benefits that Boeing offered him (nearly double that of a high school teacher). He retired from the company after 30 years, but I do not believe he was ever really happy

there. Yet, I remember that he seemed to be happy when he was teaching. I decided that, instead of making a career working for Boeing, I would make the field of education my goal. While working full time at Boeing, I completed a baccalaureate degree in occupational education and a master's degree in educational administration.

With my new skills, it soon became a logical choice to teach employees at Boeing, and I was promoted to full-time instructor. In time, I was promoted to training manager and had instructors reporting to me. I thoroughly enjoyed being able to set up new programs and provide pathways for employees to become engineers. I also was able to work with various community colleges to recruit employees and set up training programs.

I was then offered a job as a "loaned" executive at North Seattle Community College (NSCC). I became one of 13 loaned executives from Boeing, although I was the only one in education. I was very interested in the community college system and eager to learn as much as I could during my time at NSCC. I worked at NSCC for a year and then moved on to South Seattle Community College (SSCC) where I was offered the job of associate dean of technical education. I have now been at SSCC for nine years, and in July 2006, I became the executive dean for technical education.

As a result of my own career path in which I have moved from the very technical object-oriented world of the Boeing Company to the people-oriented world of education, it is appropriate that my research paradigm be interpretive. I am much more interested in the meaning behind people's actions than the actions themselves. For instance: Why was my father happier teaching school than he was at his higher-paying job at Boeing? What was it that guided me to change my career path from engineering to education? How do

employers understand and feel about a new degree, the ACCBD? Do recent graduates with this degree share the same understanding and feelings? These are the type of questions that can be explored using interpretive design.

Grounded Theory Method

Within the interpretive methodology, the method of grounded theory was used to develop a step-by-step process to collect, sort, evaluate, and analyze the data used in this study. According to Creswell (2002), grounded theory grew out of the quantitative (positivistic) movement and was first developed by Glaser and Straus (1967). Much debate has been focused on what “real” grounded theory is and how it works. At some point, Glaser and Straus became divided as to how grounded theory should evolve. Other authors, such as Corbin and Charmaz, soon joined this debate. Creswell (2002) described three grounded theory types: (a) the systematic design (Glaser), (b) the emerging design (Straus & Corbin), and (c) the constructivist design (Charmaz). This study was constructed using primarily the concepts of grounded theory as espoused by Charmaz (2002). The constructivist design fits the interpretive methodology and was used by Charmaz to develop grounded theory by building on previous ideas and concepts. Charmaz laid out the primary concepts of grounded theory from a constructivist perspective, which has several main concepts. According to Creswell (1998), the primary goal of grounded theory is to explore common experiences of individuals in order to develop a theory. In addition, Charmaz (2006), in her most recent book, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, described other key components of grounded theory as they relate to the constructivist perspective. These include: (a) theoretical sampling, (b) coding, (c) memo-writing, (d) sorting, (e) data analysis, and (f) theory construction. The following

paragraphs describe Charmaz's view of grounded theory, which was the view that I took in this study.

Theoretical sampling is a method of data collection. The concept, according to Charmaz, is that the first set of data collected is analyzed, and consideration is made as to what other kind of data needs to be collected in order to more completely respond to the study research questions. In a survey model of data collecting, theoretical sampling may change the questions asked, may require an adjustment in the demographic of the individuals being surveyed, and may show a need to collect other types of data, such as collecting documents or conducting observations. Sampling is said to be complete when saturation is attained. Saturation can be described as being reached when similar patterns or themes emerge from different sets of data, and no additional gathering of data produces new themes (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory can be done in a step-by-step process, but, due to its nature, it may take the form of two steps forward and one step backwards. This is due to the fact that data is evaluated as it is received. Part of the ongoing evaluation of data includes coding.

Coding the data is a process in which the data received is broken down (in some cases by word or by line) in order to help sort and organize the data. As is common in other interpretive methods of research, coding in grounded theory is based on the fact that the categories are not predetermined but rather arise out of the data. This process helps with the development of themes and often sparks memo-writing. Memo-writing may be as simple as jotting down an idea driven out of the data or data collection process. The memo-writing process, on the other extreme, could be a well-articulated data analysis statement that could later be used to develop the theory that is the purpose of this study.

Grounded theory uses inductive analysis to develop a theory or set of theories from the data. The process allows for evolving analysis and the ability to use theoretical sampling to adjust data collection during the data collection process. Constructivism in grounded theory presupposes that the researcher will construct the reality that he/she encounters during the process of the study. The researcher will bring all of her/his experience to the study and make connections and understand constraints. Charmaz (2006) stated, "Constructivists acknowledge that their interpretation of the studied phenomenon is itself a construction" (p. 187). This above description of grounded theory and the associated processes was based primarily on the theory of Charmaz (2006) and was the basis for the design of this study.

Data Collected

Data collection for this study used the theoretical sampling process as described by Charmaz (2006). In 2005, South Seattle Community College began gathering data for a proposed ACCBD degree in Hospitality Management. This data gathered from the South Seattle Community College Hospitality Management BAS degree proposal became, in fact, the first step in the theoretical sampling process for my proposed study. Data was used from the student surveys, structured interviews, and focus groups to identify further data collection in this study.

The South Seattle Community College data collection process indicated that employers concurred that offering the BAS degree was a good idea. These employers had not yet hired nor worked with students with ACCBD degrees. From this data, I concluded that it would be beneficial for my study to describe perceptions of employers who have hired graduates with similar applied baccalaureate degrees conferred at community

colleges. Similarly, potential students thought the ACCBD a worthwhile option to introduce. It was determined that the next step would be to interview graduates from similar programs to compare their experience with the ACCBD graduates. As such, the beginning of the grounded theory process using theoretical sampling to determine what data to collect and who to collect it from was established for my study.

For my study, research questions/interviews were designed to gather information from employers and graduates about their perceptions with regard to the ACCBD degree. Some of the data was collected prior to conducting the interviews in order to further formulate the study questions. The main study questions were the following:

1. How do graduates who have earned a community college baccalaureate degree view the degree?
2. How do employers of ACCBD graduates view the degree?

Data Needed and Collection Procedures

The key to grounded theory, which is often conducted through interviews, is to collect data that helps the theory to evolve (Charmaz, 2006). This current study collected data primarily in the form of interview questions from employers who have hired graduates with ACCBD and graduates from ACCBD programs. The two main questions broke into ten sub-questions.

With respect to the employers' perceptions of the ACCBD, the following ten sub-questions were asked:

1. How familiar are you with the ACCBD?
2. Why did you hire a graduate(s) with an ACCBD program rather than a graduate with a degree from a university with a similar focus? (Possible

follow-up question in the event that they had no other option would be: If a student from a university had also been available, what would have you done and why?)

3. How well did the ACCBD degree prepare the graduate for work? What were their strengths? What were their weaknesses?
4. Would you hire more graduates from the ACCBD? Why or why not?
5. Would you suggest any changes in the program? If so, what kind of changes?
6. Please describe what you see as the strengths of the program.
7. Do you hire graduates that have just the two-year applied degree? If yes, can you describe the difference between the two levels of education in terms of employee value to your company?
8. Do graduates express a desire to continue their education? Does your company encourage graduates to continue their education? If so, how?
9. The ACCBD is an application based degree. Can you describe your view of the appropriate amount of theory versus application? Does the ACCBD meet your expectations in terms of application versus theory? If so, how; and if not, why not?
10. What questions have I missed?

With respect to the graduates' perceptions of the ACCBD, the following ten sub-questions were asked:

1. Please describe your experience attaining an ACCBD
2. Why did you decide to enroll in the ACCBD program rather than a program with a similar focus located at a university?

- (a) (Possible follow-up question in the event they say they had no other options: If a university program had also been available, what would have you done, and why?)
3. How well did your ACCBD degree prepare you for work? What were the strengths? What were the weaknesses?
 4. Would you recommend this degree to others? Why or why not?
 5. Would you suggest any major changes in the program? If so, what kind of changes?
 6. Please describe what you see as the strengths of the program.
 7. Please describe how your previous education prepared you for the ACCBD.
 8. Have you considered additional education? Did your degree prepare you for the next step? If not, why? If so, how?
 9. Please describe the difference between application and theory as it related to the way your degree was taught.
 10. What questions have I missed?

In addition to the employer and graduate interviews, documentation was also gathered. This documentation included job descriptions, job advertisements from employers, and documentation from the community college describing the kinds of jobs for which the graduates from the ACCBD program would be qualified. Data was primarily collected through the theoretical sampling process. Charmaz's (2006) description of theoretical sampling was to focus on a category, from the broader data that had been collected previously. In my study, the broader data collection began with the South Seattle ACCBD proposal development. This provided the broad data to examine,

and I was able to select a category to focus on (perceptions of graduates and employers) which was still much unknown. I gathered more data in this category in order to elaborate and clarify properties of the category until no new properties arose.

Selection of Participating Colleges

For the purposes of this study, participating colleges were selected in British Columbia, Nevada, and Florida. The intent of this study was to capture a wide variety of college characteristics, including size, (small, medium and large) and location, (rural, suburban, and urban). In addition, in order for graduates and employers to have time to develop perceptions, I wanted colleges that had at least three to five years of graduates from which to select for interviews. All ACCBD programs offered at each of the colleges were candidates for my study.

British Columbia colleges have been offering applied baccalaureate degrees for over 15 years (Skolnik, 2005) and are now a mature system, particularly in comparison to most American colleges that have only recently begun conferring applied baccalaureate degrees at the community college level. The target British Columbia college was Kwantlen Polytechnic University, located in Surrey, a Vancouver BC suburb. Kwantlen has been offering the ACCBD since 1995 (Skolnik, 2005) and currently offers five applied baccalaureate degrees (Kwantlen, 2009). Kwantlen is a midsized campus with approximately 12,000 students.

St. Petersburg College is an urban college located in Florida, just across the bay from Tampa Bay. The college was granted authorization to begin offering the ACCBD in 2001 (Furlong, 2005) and currently offers ten ACCBD's (St. Petersburg College, 2006). St. Petersburg college is a large college with 36,000 students in college level classes.

Great Basin College, located in northern rural Nevada, received approval to offer its first baccalaureate degree in 1999 (Remington & Remington, 2005). Great Basin College currently offers five applied baccalaureate degrees (Great Basin College, 2006). The college is relatively small with approximately 3,500 college level students. I started my study with Great Basin College and found through the process of memo-writing and theme emergence that the original set of questions provided rich data from the interview candidates and did not need to be adjusted.

Dr. Kenneth P. Walker, President of the Community College Baccalaureate Association and President of Edison College in Florida (personal communication, February 22, 2006), recommended St. Petersburg College as a good site to collect data on employers' perceptions of ACCBD's. Dr. Walker further confirmed that Great Basin College and one of the British Columbia colleges would also be good candidates for this study.

Selection of Study Programs

Once the colleges were selected, it was important to identify ACCBD programs that would meet the criteria for this study. Appropriate programs included those that were designed to accept two-year applied degrees, often called Associate of Applied Science degrees, in transfer. Examples of these ACCBD degrees include: Bachelors of Applied Science in Management in Technology, Bachelors of Applied Science in Dental Hygiene, and Bachelors of Applied Arts in Psychology. This was the criteria given to the colleges in order to identify which programs to select study participants. In order to participate in my study graduates needed to have completed one of these types of applied baccalaureate degrees.

Selection of Study Participants

This study was focused on employers who have experience with the community college applied baccalaureate degree and graduates who have completed an ACCBD program. Both sets of participants were selected from each of the three study sites, Kwantlen, St. Petersburg or Great Basin.

The criteria for selecting employers to participate in my study was that they had to have hired at least one graduate from an ACCBD program from one of the three colleges selected. In addition the employer had to be willing to participate in a 30-60 minute face to face interview. The rationale for selecting employers who had hired graduates was to improve soundness of data by interviewing people with direct experience with ACCBD graduates' work. The criteria for selection of graduates to participate in my study was that they needed to have graduated with an ACCBD from one of the three colleges selected and be willing to participate in a 30-60 minute face to face interview. In one case, one of the graduates had not officially graduated at the time of the interview, but was within a few weeks of graduation. A follow up phone call confirmed that this participant had officially graduated. The rationale for a broad ACCBD graduate selection criteria, allowing all ACCBD programs as described in the Selection of Study Programs section, was based on the relatively small pool of students who had graduated from these ACCBD programs.

The process for contacting the ACCBD graduates and the employers of ACCBD graduates at the three sites was as follows: First, I contacted each college and described the number and type of employers and graduates that I would like to interview, along with an explanation of the purpose of the study. I made initial requests to the colleges,

and all were willing to help identify employers and graduates. Each college had a different process for giving me contact information. One college scheduled all of the interviews for me and then sent me a schedule. One college gave me a list of graduates along with employers who indicated their willingness to be interviewed. One college gave me the list of students and had me contact the employers by contacting the graduates and asking if their employer would be willing to be interviewed. A total of 25 interviews were conducted at three different sites, including 18 graduates and seven employers. I conducted ten interviews at one college, nine at another, and six at the remaining site. I also searched web sites and asked for printed material on the campuses. I reviewed employer web sites, newspapers, and requested internal job description documents. I had originally planned to interview five or six graduates and five or six employers at each site. This was not always possible as attaining employer information from colleges was difficult, and the employer group proved more difficult to schedule interview time with due to busy schedules.

Data Analysis Procedures

In analyzing the data, I used Charmaz's (2006) process, including the constant memo-writing method, to analyze the data into emerging themes. This was a simultaneous process integrating data analysis and data collection. In this process, a set of categories was developed after the first interview. And after the second interview, the categories were refined. This process continued until a saturation point was achieved in all the categories. As the interviews accumulated, they began to show the same responses; thus, the point of saturation became apparent (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2002;

Dick, 2002). During the process, the underlying theory began to emerge and gain credibility. All participant interviews were reordered and transcribed.

Theme development was divided into two sets in order to follow the research questions, one set for graduate perceptions and one set for employer perceptions. Five themes were developed for the graduate and two for the employer. Throughout the process coding was used to categorize data. Once the themes emerged, the process of diagramming was used “to tease out relationships while constructing their analyses and to demonstrate these relationships in their final work” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 117). These diagrams were developed and used to clarify themes. Coded data could then be analyzed and connected to the diagrams and the theme further developed. The theory was developed primarily from data and the themes; in addition my experiences were also incorporated into the theory development. Charmaz (2006) described constructing grounded theory from a constructionist design perspective. That is, researcher will bring all of her/his experience to the study and make connections and understand constraints. The development of the theory provided resonance and originality to my study. Finally, to verify the findings, the theory was reviewed by the participants for credibility.

Strategies to Ensure Soundness of Findings

The criteria used to ensure soundness of finding in my interpretive research study using grounded theory was credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness (Charmaz, 2006).

Credibility involves answering questions such as; “Has your research intimate familiarity with the setting or topic?” and, “Do the categories cover a wide range of empirical observations?” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 182). Charmaz (2006) also described

originality as finding new insights and extending current ideas; she also described resonance as connecting the larger collective with individual lives, and asked does the research make sense to the participants? Usefulness of the research is also an important factor in grounded theory research, including, “Does your analysis offer interpretations that people can use in their everyday life?” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 183).

Credibility was developed by selecting three different sites across North America. Identifying colleges in different countries and in different stages of development, as well as different sizes and settings, thus covering a wide range of manifestations of the ACCBD, helped to provide credibility as similar themes emerged from all three sites. Two different groups, graduates and employers of graduates, were also interviewed to identify similarities or differences of perceptions. Within these two groups, similar themes emerged. Additional credibility was developed by traveling to each site and interviewing each participant in a face-to-face format developing intimate familiarity with both the setting and the participants.

Originality was addressed by developing a proposed theory, The ACCBD as a Community Builder. The proposed theory has at least two of the components of originality - new insight and building on current ideas. The process of member checking was used to find out if the themes developed in this study made sense to the participants. Nearly half of the participants were contacted by phone to discuss the themes and proposed theory developed as a result of my study. All of these participants agreed that the themes were appropriate and made sense to them. In addition, the proposed theory developed, The ACCBD as a Community Builder, connected individuals to the community forming an additional component of resonance by connecting the individual

with the larger collective. Finally, usefulness was attained by theme analysis which resulted in developing a proposed theory that may be used by colleges and others to identify ACCBD models that they may wish to investigate.

Following the steps of grounded theory as described by Charmaz (2006), data was carefully selected through the theoretical sampling process. This study utilized strategies for validating the accuracy of findings as described by Creswell (2002), including member checking and triangulation. For member checking, participants were asked to review and comment on the theory and themes; this helped to ensure good practice in data analysis and interpretation. Triangulation was accomplished by looking at different types of data, such as the difference between graduates and employers, and also examining the associated documentation to develop credibility.

Strategies for Protection of Human Subjects

Prior to interviewing any human subjects, this study was presented, reviewed, and approved by Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I contacted each of the colleges and requested lists of ACCBD graduates and employers of ACCBD graduates. I then made initial contact of potential participants by phone or email. Once contacted, potential participants were questioned to identify their willingness and availability to participate in the study; all potential participants had an opportunity to review the informed consent form and process and ask questions prior to committing to become a participant. Once the person had agreed to participate in the study, a time, date, and location was agreed upon for a face-to-face interview. Prior to the interview, the student researcher explained the informed consent process with the potential participant and had the participant sign the form. Confidentiality was maintained for all subjects, but

not for colleges. The data was collected and stored on a password protected lap top; the lap top was kept in secure locked location during travel and locked in a home office when not traveling. The participant's responses were coded by college and type of participant. In addition, two of the colleges had their own review boards, which also approved this study.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of the data collected from the interviews with the graduates of the applied community college baccalaureate program (ACCBD) and their employers. As this is a grounded theory approach, these data are discussed in terms of the themes that emerged. The chapter is divided into three discrete sections: a brief introduction and review of the findings; a description of the three program sites and the degrees offered; a description of the participants themselves; and finally, the presentation of the findings for the two primary research questions:

How do employers view the applied baccalaureate when conferred by community colleges?

How do graduates who have earned an applied baccalaureate from a community college view that degree?

Introduction and Review of Findings

Both graduate and employer participants in this study concurred that the ACCBD programs adequately addressed the specific needs of the students in being able to pursue this degree within their current circumstances. In other words, the graduates viewed the ACCBD program as providing them access to a baccalaureate degree, which otherwise would not necessarily be available to them. Graduates viewed that the ACCBD prepared them for their work as well as for further studies for those who planned to continue towards achieving a higher degree. Graduates also found the alternative delivery options offered, such as night and online classes, as effectively meeting their needs—primarily to work while attending classes. Other aspects of the program that the graduates identified

as helpful were smaller classes, quality faculty, and a better connection to industry than the university counterparts. Overall, graduates viewed the ACCBD programs as a positive experience that met the goals for their education, life, and work. Employers confirmed the graduates' views that their ACCBD prepared them for work and that the ACCBD colleges, in fact, were better connected to the industry. In addition, employers viewed the ACCBD colleges as community builders that helped prepare local people for local jobs.

Characteristics of Participants

There were two groups of study participants: graduates from ACCBD programs and employers who had hired graduates from ACCBD programs. A total of 25 participants were interviewed, 18 graduates and seven employers. As I was able to travel to all three of the ACCBD sites, the participants were all interviewed in a face-to-face format that lasted from 25 to 90 minutes each, with the average interview lasting 30-40 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber. Out of the 18 graduates interviewed, 14 were interviewed at their worksite, three were interviewed at the ACCBD college (one at each site), and one was interviewed at a coffee shop close to the campus.

The interview did not contain demographic information, and so I did not ask for the graduates' age; however, many self-disclosed and others were relatively easy to guess based on their life history, work status, and appearance. I have grouped the graduates into four distinct age groups: Group A, less than 25; Group B, 25-40; Group C, 41-55; and group D, 56 and older. I surmised that four graduates fell into the group A category, six graduates into both Groups B and C respectively, and just two graduates into group D.

This represented a fairly broad range of ages with a relatively even distribution. The graduates in group A all appeared to be fairly traditional baccalaureate students, and all had graduated from the same site. The other 14 graduates in Groups B, D, and C were generally nontraditional older students, and all but one reported having a family. There were five male graduates (one at one site and two at each of the other two sites), and 13 female graduates fairly evenly distributed among the three sites. All graduates were Caucasian with the exception of one Asian American. All graduates spoke English as their first language with the exception of one who identified himself as being from the Ukraine.

The graduates all appeared comfortable and forthcoming in sharing their views of the ACCBD program. Although a few began the interview in a somewhat guarded manner, midway through the interview, they seemed to let down their guard and had become comfortable sharing their experiences. One of these graduates, who seemed particularly guarded at the beginning of the interview, shared with me afterwards that it had been a cathartic experience for [her], and she expressed her emotion (actually shedding a few tears) after reflecting on all of the emotions associated with completing her degree as an older adult.

All seven employers were interviewed at their worksite. Four employers had one graduate employee and three had more than one working for them; these graduates were also part of the study and included in the above group. Three employers were interviewed at two separate college sites respectively, and one employer was interviewed at a third college site. The three areas represented by these employers were law enforcement/federal government, education/business/accounting firm, and a research

agency. The employers were harder to schedule, and the interviews tended to be shorter. Nonetheless, they were very amenable to the study and provided very useful information.

College Profiles

Three colleges were included in this study. St Petersburg College and Kwantlen Polytechnic University were both in suburban areas; Great Basin College was in a rural area.

St. Petersburg College

St. Petersburg College is located in Pinellas County, a 280 square-mile isthmus on the west side of the Florida peninsula, bordered on the west by the Gulf of Mexico and on the east by Tampa Bay. The heart of the city of St. Petersburg is located on the east side of this peninsula, on the west coast of Tampa Bay, with its borders expanding to the southern tip of Tampa Bay and its western edge against the Gulf of Mexico. St. Petersburg (which was named after the Russian birthplace of one of its founders) was incorporated in 1892 and is now commonly referred to as “St. Pete’s.” In 2008, its population was 248,232; it is Florida’s fourth largest city. The temperate climate and waterfront attractions of Pinellas County and St. Petersburg have rendered them a popular destination for vacationers and permanent residents alike. The primary businesses in Pinellas County are health services, manufacturing, financial services, and tourism services (see Table 1), which has been among the main industries since the city’s incorporation (Pinellas County, 2008). Up until the Great Depression, construction had also been a major industry; St. Petersburg was seriously impacted by the Great Depression.

Table 1

St. Petersburg Demographic Data

County Employment by Industry (2007)	
Construction	25,457
Manufacturing	50,039
Wholesale Trade	3,065
Retail Trade	109,194
Transportation and Utilities	22,059
Finance/Insurance/Real Estate	53,799
Health/Lodging/Educational/Business Services	213,280
Accommodation/Agriculture	36,800
Public Administration	26,691

SPC is comprised of four campuses and five learning centers scattered throughout Pinellas County. The St. Petersburg/Gibbs campus is located in St. Petersburg; the other three campuses are located in the cities of Clearwater, Seminole, and Tarpon Springs. Of the five learning centers, three are also located in St. Petersburg: the Allstate Center and the Downtown and Midtown Centers. In addition, Caruth Health Education Center is located in Pinellas Park, and the EpiCenter is located in Largo. Each of these nine sites offers a distinct area of study.

The St. Petersburg/Gibbs campus, SPC's oldest existing campus, is described as a "full-service location." It contains most of the college's athletic programs as well as performing arts and a planetarium. The Clearwater campus, which was opened in 1965, is the site of SPC's Early College program. Through this program, high school juniors and seniors can earn college credit and graduate from high school having earned both a high school diploma and an associate of arts degree. In 1998, SPC opened its third campus, Seminole. This site offers certificates, both associate and bachelor programs, as well as a

graduate-level program through the campus's University Partnership Center. Through this partnership, students have access to over 100 bachelor and master degree programs offered through 17 institutions. The Tarpon Springs campus opened in 1975 and is located in the north Pinellas County. It is host to an art museum and a fine arts education center.

The learning centers include the Caruth Health Education Center which primarily offers programs in health and human services. The downtown and midtown centers have more recently been added (opening in 2005 and 2003, respectively). The downtown campus offers freshman- and sophomore-level courses in areas that include business technologies, communications, and social sciences. The midtown center was created at the request of the city of St. Petersburg for assistance with its Midtown Redevelopment Act. SPC shares the EpiCenter facility with Pinellas County, as the county's corporate training program is located here, and students are able to work on graduate-level programs through the college's University Partnership Program.

St. Petersburg Junior College (SPJC) was Florida's first private community college. It was founded in 1927 by local businesspersons and educators as a nonprofit, private college in part in response to the economic climate to address the need for affordable education for adults. SPJC became a public institution in 1947, the second of its kind in the state of Florida. In 2001 the college became the first community college in Florida approved to award bachelor degrees. In order to embrace its additional role as a baccalaureate-granting institution, the word "Junior" was dropped from the college's name in 2002 and it was renamed St. Petersburg College (SPC).

SPC's enrollment for Fall 2008 was 27,076, with the majority of students being at the St. Petersburg/Gibbs campus. The racial breakdown of these students is as follows: 76% White, 10.3% Black, 6.2% Hispanic, 6.2% Asian, 4% American Indian, and 3.7% unknown. Well over half were female students (61.8%); 38.2% were male students; 86.7% intended to earn a degree (see Table 2 below).

St. Petersburg College offers an Applied Science Bachelor degree in 10 areas: Banking, Dental Hygiene, Health Services Administration, International Business, Management and Organizational Leadership, Orthotics and Prosthetics, Paralegal Studies, Public Safety Administration, Technology Management, and Veterinary Technology. In addition, a Bachelor of Science degree can be earned in Education and Nursing. With regard to the traditional Associate in Arts degree, over 200 majors are available. Associate in Science, Associate in Applied Science, as well as a number of Technical and Advanced Technical Certificates, and Applied Technology Diplomas are also available.

Table 2

St Petersburg College Demographic Data

Enrollment Statistics

Annual Unduplicated Head Count

Credit enrollment (2006-07)	36,133
Non-credit enrollment (2006-07)	25,797

Table 2 (continued)

St Petersburg College Demographic Data

Student Profiles*Opening Fall Headcount 2007*

Men	9,417
Women	16,797

Ethnic Breakdown

Black	2,754
American Indian	121
White	19,969
Asian	863
Hispanic	1,511
Not known `947	

Age Breakdown

19 and under	6,364
20-24	7,698
25-29	3,866
30-39	4,301
40-49	2,562
50-59	97
60 and older	239

Degree and Faculty Statistics

Baccalaureate	517
Associate in Arts	1,866
Associate in Science	841
Certificates	578
Total	3,802

As an example, the Bachelor of Applied Science in Dental Hygiene (BASDH) is designed to be taken completely online, one course at a time. The total semester credits required for the degree is 120. Students must have a dental hygiene degree to be

admitted. The 36 semester credits of general education requirements for the BASDH are as follows:

- Communications
- Humanities/Fine Arts
- Mathematics
- Natural and Physical Sciences (to be met by specific courses in support courses area)
- Social and Behavioral Sciences
- Ethics
- Computer/Information Literacy Competency

Support courses require a total of 12 semester credits and are as follows:

- Human Anatomy and Physiology I with lab
- Human Anatomy and Physiology II with lab
- Microbiology with lab
- Lower division dental hygiene

Major courses total 30 semester credits and are as follows:

- Contemporary Issues in Dental Hygiene
- Dental Hygiene Educational Concepts
- Introduction to Dental Hygiene Research
- Advanced Ethics in Dental Hygiene
- Dental Hygiene Practice Management
- Advanced Periodontics
- Leadership in Dental Hygiene

- Dental Hygiene Capstone

St Pete's campus is in both a urban and suburban area with homes and shopping across the street from some of the campuses. The area geography (Tampa Bay on one side and the Gulf of Mexico on the other) makes the City of St. Petersburg a relatively isolated community.

Kwantlen Polytechnic University

Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU) is located in the province of British Columbia in southwestern Canada. KPU has three campuses in the city of Surrey, as well as campuses in Richmond and Langley. The city of Surrey is 122.5 square miles, the 12th largest city in Canada and the 2nd largest city in British Columbia (after Vancouver), with a population of 461,150 (Vancouver, 2008). Surrey borders the United States on the south and the Fraser River on the north. Although primarily urban, still, agriculture is an important industry in Surrey, and the city has many acres of forests and parks. Most recently, Surrey's fastest growing industry has been building services. Of note, the Surrey School District and the Surrey Memorial Hospital employ the largest number of people. Vancouver Airport is nearby, and as a major western airport, serves many flights to and from Asia. In fact, Surrey has experienced rapid growth and a recent increase in immigration. In 2006, an estimated 30.3% of Surrey's population was born outside of Canada, with almost half of this group coming from South Asia. The challenge and goal of Kwantlen Polytechnic University is to meet the needs of this thriving and diverse community.

Kwantlen is an offshoot of Douglas College and was founded in 1981 with the goal of serving the communities of Delta, Langley, Richmond, and Surrey, which are

across the Fraser River to the south of Douglas College's New Westminster location. In 1988, Kwantlen was one of five community colleges in British Columbia approved to award applied baccalaureate degrees. In 1995, Kwantlen College's name was changed to Kwantlen University College, and it was given the authority to grant bachelor degrees. After a campaign from the college to be recognized as an undergraduate university, the name was changed again to its current name: Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

Unique to the Surrey campus, located in the nursing laboratory, is a life-sized, computer-controlled dummy that simulates illness (there is only one other in all of British Columbia). The Surrey campus also offers a number of other state-of-the-art features, including open laboratories systems, psychology laboratories, visual arts studios, and a gymnasium and fitness center. On the Cloverdale campus, the Trades and Technology Centre was opened in 2007. With all the aforementioned, the Cloverdale campus has a leading edge in trades and technology training. Programs in the trades are hands-on, applied, apprenticeship programs; degree programs are offered as well.

Other campuses include the Newton campus, which is also located in Surrey; the Richmond campus in Richmond, which offers graphic design, interior design, production and sewing, and science laboratories for hands-on learning. The Langley campus in Langley offers science programs, including botany and horticulture, as well as music programs.

KPU's enrollment for Fall 2008 was 12,642. The vast majority of the students are at the Surrey campus (6,970) and the Richmond campus (5, 012); 768 students are taking their coursework online. Nearly two thirds of the student body is under 30: 18% are 18 or younger; 57% are between 19 and 24 (the traditional student age); 11% are between 25

and 29 years old. The breakdown of the remaining 14% of students is as follows: 4%, 30-34; 3%, 35-39; 2%, 40-44; and 5%, 45 or older. The majority of the student are female (57%); 43% are male. Of this student body, 2,224 are enrolled in a bachelor degree program, 4,273 are enrolled in an associate degree program. During the previous school year (2007-2008), nearly a quarter of the students (24%) were awarded bachelor degrees; the remaining degrees and certificates broke down as follows: 9% associate degrees, 27% certificates, and the remaining 39% a variety of credentials (see Table 3 below).

Table 3

Kwantlen Polytechnic University

Enrollment

Fall 2008	12,642
Surrey campus	6,970
Richmond campus	5,012
Online students	768

Approximately 17,000 students are enrolled annually.

Student Profiles

Sex (expressed in percentage)

Men	43
Women	57

Table 3 (continued)

Kwantlen Polytechnic University

Student Profiles (continued)

Ethnic Breakdown (expressed in percentage)

White	47
South Asian	18
East Asian	5
Southeast Asian	2
Canadian Aboriginal	2
Other	9

Age Breakdown (expressed in percentage)

18 and under	18
19-24	57
25-29	11
30-34	4
35-39	3
40-44	2
45 and older	5

Degree and Faculty Statistics

Degree Students Pursuing

Baccalaureate	2,224
Associate in Arts	4,273

Degrees Awarded 2007-2008 (expressed in percentage)

Baccalaureate	24
Associates	9
Certificates	27
Other credentials	39

Over 450 degrees are awarded annually.

Over 1,600 other credentials are awarded annually.

Over 9,500 FTE (full-time equivalency) are awarded annually.

A total of 29,800 students have graduated from KPU; 25,000 are registered alumni;
200,000 students have been educated at Kwantlen to date.

Although Kwantlen does not keep official figures on ethnicity, a registration survey done in October 2007, which was completed by 2,017 of the students, had the following results: 47% Caucasian, 19% South Asian, 18% East Asian, 5% Southeast Asian, 2% Canadian Aboriginal, and 9% of the students marked “other.” In addition, 32% of respondents indicated that English was not their first language.

Kwantlen has an enrollment of approximately 17,000 students annually with over 9,500 FTE (full-time equivalency), 450 degree credentials awarded, and 1,600 certificates or other credentials awarded annually. Since its inception in 1981, KPU has graduated 29,800 students. And over, 200,000 students have been enrolled at Kwantlen to date.

Great Basin College

The main campus of Great Basin College is located in Elko, Nevada, a small town located off Interstate 80 in the northeastern part of the state. The city of Elko is 15 square miles with a population of 16,708 (City of Elko, 2009). The main industry is mining. The city’s Web site describes Elko as a “growing, progressive small city ready for the 21st century” (City of Elko, 2009). With a seeming penchant for promoting educational opportunities, Elko was the site of Nevada’s first high school in 1885 and also the first home of the University of Nevada (from 1874 until 1885); in 1885, the University relocated to Reno.

In the late ‘60s, some forward-looking Elkoans and other Nevadians organized to build a community college in Elko as a way to revitalize the city’s faltering economy and “help solve the problem of distance that had always plagued higher education in the Nevada outback” (Great Basin College, 2009). Elko Community College was Nevada’s first community college and opened in September 1967. Although the first year was

tenuous, with local support and the unexpected financial assistance of Howard Hughes, the college stayed solvent. The name was changed to North Nevada Community College in 1968, and 1995 its name was changed again to Great Basin College (GBC).

Including its main campus in the city of Elko, GBC's service area covers 62,000 square miles and six counties, with branch campuses located in the cities of Battle Mountain (Lander County), Ely (White Pine County), Pahrump (Nye County), and Winnemucca (Humboldt County). It also has 13 satellite centers scattered throughout these six counties. The distance between Elko and these branch campuses is as follows: 125 miles to the Winnemucca branch campus, 70 miles to the Battle Mountain campus, 180 miles south to the Ely campus, and the Pahrump campus is the furthest distance at 436 miles south. Six of these satellite centers are in towns that border Nevada's neighboring states of California, Idaho, Oregon, and Utah.

The main Elko campus covers 44 acres. The buildings are modern, one and two stories high, and they are clustered around a main hub. In 2001, a bell tower, waterway, amphitheater, and solarium were added, and the landscaping throughout the sprawling campus was upgraded. Amenities include a fitness center and housing within walking distance for single and married students as well as students with children.

Including all branches, satellites, and the online students, GBC's enrollment for Fall 2007 was 3,410. The majority of the student body (1,934 students), are connected with the main campus in Elko. Of these, 1,413 are online students. Of note, 80% of these students attend school part time. The average age of students enrolled at GBC in the 2007-2008 academic year was 31. The age breakdown is as follows: 56% of the students (1,989) are 25-34, 39% are 35-49, and 14% are 50 years old or older. The ethnic

breakdown has been consistent since 2000 and is as follows: 77% of students identified themselves as White, 10% Hispanic, 4% American Indian, 1% Asian, 1% Black, and 7% unspecified. More women were enrolled than men at 61% of students versus 39%, respectively, and 65% of the student body was in a degree program (see Table 4 below).

Table 4

Great Basin College

Enrollment

Fall 2007	3,410
Main Campus	1,934
Internet students (enrolled at main campus)	1,413

80% of students are enrolled part time.
65% of students with in a degree program.

Student Profiles

Sex (expressed in percentage)

Men	39
Women	61

Ethnic Breakdown (expressed in percentage)

White	77
Hispanic	10
American Indian	4
Asian	1
Black	1
Other	7

Age Breakdown (expressed in percentage)

Average age (31)

25-34	56
35-49	39
50 and older	14

Including all specializations, GBC offers five bachelor degree programs, 22 applied associate degree programs, two transfer associate degree programs, and 12 certificate programs, as well as a number of short-term programs. In the 2007-2008 academic year, 45 certificates were conferred and 248 degrees, 45 of which were bachelor degrees.

GBC offered its first bachelor degree program in 1999. Applied bachelor degrees (BAS) are currently offered in Agriculture Management, Management in Technology, Digital Information Technology, Instrumentation, and Land Surveying/Geomatics. Bachelor of arts degrees (BA) are offered in Elementary or Secondary Education and Integrative Studies; bachelor of science (BS) degrees are offered in Nursing and Social Work. Associates degrees are offered in agriculture, broadcast technology, business administration, computer office technology, education, nursing, radiology technology, human services, criminal justice, engineering, diesel technology, electrical systems technology, fire science management, industrial energy efficiency, industrial millwright technology, and welding technology. Certificates are offered in many of these same areas with short-term programs offered in some of the business areas.

The college describes their bachelor of applied science degree as “perhaps one of the most practical in the Great Basin College Integrative Curriculum” (Great Basin College, 2009). Students can enter the program with an associate degree from any regionally accredited college. The degree program is structured to “accommodate working adults whose schedules may be limited due to work and time constraints” (Great Basin College, 2009). The program was designed with the expectation that the students would be older and have a number of years of work experience, as well as an associate

degree. These degrees are specifically designed to meet employer needs within each particular specialty area. The intent of the degree is to enable students to progress in their current field or apply new theories to a different aspect of their field. The BAS offers five areas of emphasis:

- Management in Technology
- Agriculture Management
- Digital Information Technology
- Instrumentation
- Land Surveying Geomatics

The bachelor of applied science degree at Great Basin College requires 24 to 27 semester credits (in addition to the required Associate of Applied Science [AAS] degree), which comprise the following:

- Fundamentals of Speech or Oral Interpretation
- Professional Communications
- Mathematical Systems Applied to Technology or Calculus I
- Integrative Humanities Seminar
- Integrative Social Science Seminar
- Integrative Mathematics Seminar
- Integrative Science Seminar
- Professional Ethics
- U.S. and Nevada Constitution (or equivalent)

In addition, 15 semester credits of Applied Science Core are required:

- Applied Accounting and Finance

- Foundations of Management Theory and Practice
- Organization and Interpersonal Behavior or Human Resource Management
- Science and Engineering in Technology or Physics for Scientists and Engineers I
- Operational Quality Control and Problem Solving

Each area of emphasis requires 21 to 30 of these emphasis courses. The BAS in Land Surveying/Geomatics has requirements unique to its program with respect to general education and applied science core requirements.

While visiting GBC to conduct interviews with participant students, I was also able to spend an extra day discussing accreditation issues with administrators and faculty at GBC, and reviewing the accreditation visit in 2003 by the regional accreditation body whereby GBC was upgraded from two-year to four-year status with the, North West Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU). These meetings took place on November 7, 2007, and included the following:

- Lunch meeting with the president and the former special assistant to the president (now faculty)
- Group meeting with the president, former special assistant to the president, vice president of instruction, vice president of student services, vice president of administrative services, and director of the foundation
- Additional group meetings with the institutional researcher and faculty chairs from the baccalaureate programs, education, nursing, integrated studies.

The following is a list of insights gleaned from these meetings for consideration both regarding the BAS degree itself and preparation for an accreditation visit:

- Ensure all activities associated with adding a BAS degree are well documented
- Ensure academic integrity when assessing 300- and 400-level courses, including level of writing and research and use of the library
- Ensure students are involved in planning and student government
- Ensure faculty are given adequate release time (this was one that was mentioned several times)
- Collaborate across the campus with BAS, other faculty, Student Services, and others
- Ensure library is appropriately stocked for upper division coursework
- Ensure faculty and staff are provided ample opportunities for research and scholarship
- Ensure adequate data collection and analysis of student placement postgraduation
- For Standard VI, ensure clarity of organization chart and that people understand how and why it was developed
- If the college mission has not changed to include the BAS degree, highlight the benefits of the BAS program as it relates to the school, other students, and the program participants and graduates
- Develop student handbook as well as advising sheets and add in Standard IX

Presentation of Data

In analyzing the participants' response to the questions, a number of themes emerged. The first five themes are from the point of view of the graduates, research question #1, and the latter two themes are taken from the interviews with the employers, research question #2.

A coding key is provided in Table 5 below to identify the respondents.

Table 5

Coding Key to Identify Respondents

Code	College	Code	
A	College A	X	Student
B	College B	Y	Employer
C	College C		

Example: AX3 would be the third graduate interviewed at College A; CY1 would be the first employer interviewed at College C.

 Themes 1 to 5: Graduates' Perspectives

Research Question1: How do graduates who have earned a community college baccalaureate degree view the degree?

This question was designed to develop themes emerging from the perspective of the employee/program graduate. This is an interpretive study using a grounded theory method, which allows for flexibility in the questions discussed (Charmaz, 2006); however, the original questions yielded excellent data from the participants, and thus, did not need to be revised. The data gathered from the views of the 18 graduates interviewed generated the following five themes:

1. *Mitigating Significant Barriers:* A number of significant barriers prevented the students from choosing more traditional degree programs.
2. *Relevant Programming:* Due to the characteristics of the students, who were mostly nontraditional (i.e., older and established with families and jobs), a number of requirements were needed to make it possible and compelling for them to participate in a degree program.

3. *Prepared for Graduate School:* One particular feature of the ACCBD program was that it adequately prepared the students for graduate or other professional further education.

4. *Use of Alternative Delivery Methods:* Alternative delivery methods were needed in order for nontraditional students to be able to participate in the program.

5. *Relevant to Current Jobs:* The ACCBD program was relevant to student's current jobs or career aspirations.

Theme 1: Mitigating Significant Barriers

The first theme to emerge was that there are significant barriers, diagramed in Figure 1, to obtaining a baccalaureate degree, and many of these were addressed by the ACCBD program. Said one participant: *"Now we can actually see a way to work full time and to work towards a degree"* (CX5).

In response to question 2: Why did you decide to enroll in the ACCBD program rather than a program with a similar focus located at a university? the overall umbrella response was "time and money." Most of the specific factors noted relate back in some way to time and money, and these factors included issues of employment, family, location, educational background, and various other self-limiting and outside-limiting issues. The two areas of concern that came up repeatedly when graduates discussed their decision to pursue a bachelor's degree were the need to maintain a steady income and have time with their families.

Need to Maintain Full-Time Employment

Most of the graduates who participated in the study reported working full time while attending classes. For most, quitting work to return to school—or even cutting back on hours—was not an option. Participants noted that their classmates were often in the same situation: *“Most of my classmates worked; I think most of them worked full time—if not full time, very close to it, maybe 32 to 35 hours per week”* (BX4), and from a student talking about an ACCBD program designed specifically for her occupation: *“There were a few of us [coworkers] who jumped on the bandwagon and were very excited because*

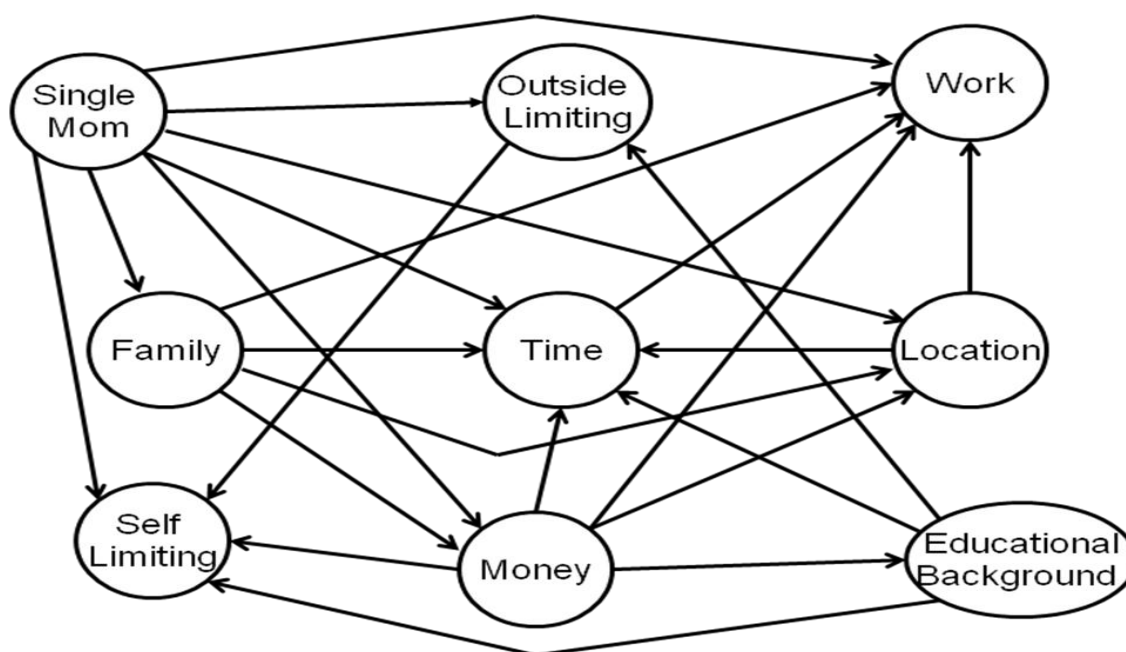


Figure 1. Theme 1: Perceived web of interconnected barriers to attain a baccalaureate.

now we can actually see a way to work full time and to work towards a degree” (CX5). In addition, traditional programs often do not accommodate employment restraints: *“The typical university did not offer a lot of opportunities for me to be a true student working full time while going to school”* (CX5). Another graduate commented, *“I was working full*

time at the time.... I was working at my position and filling in for a friend of mine in hygiene, so it [the ACCBD degree] allowed me to do that” (BX4).

Employer participants also confirmed that their employees worked full time while attending college. In some cases, employers provided support in terms of release time and flexible scheduling, financial support, and personal encouragement. One employer commented on the fact that the program had been designed to support employees returning to school: *“The intent of the program was ... that we would target positions for individuals that worked through that program, and then once they received their degree, they are eligible for noncompetitive placement within the Bureau” (AY2).*

In most cases, being able to maintain full-time employment while attending school was a major consideration. For many, the ACCBD seemed to be the only option available to bridge this gap between working full time and attending school. There was a clear link between having quality family time and being able to adequately support the family while, at the same time, pursuing a college degree. One graduate, a single mother, stated, *“I needed the full-time employment, and so to make the full-time employment work with my schooling, I really had to go here” (AX5).* This participant perceived that her options were either to attend an ACCBD or not attend school at all. Moreover, in addition to accommodating work requirements, some ACCBD programs were developed specifically for businesses employees.

Need to Maintain Family Commitments

Family commitment was an important factor for most graduates when deciding to return to school. In fact, the majority of the study participants were parents, most of whom relayed common needs, such as continuing to work to support their family, being

near to and maintaining quality time with the family, and for single parents, these needs were even more pronounced. One graduate said, *“I really didn’t see it being a possibility that I would ever get my bachelor’s degree while having four small kids, working full time”* (CX5). With regard to accommodations for parents, this graduate remarked, *“It was not uncommon to have a mom bring a baby to class. I did not experience that at [previous college]”* (CX5). At least one graduate had chosen to wait until his children had grown up and left home before beginning his own studies. There was, therefore, a significant gap between his associate and bachelor degree. He explained, *“Then the wife and I raised our family. And then the kids were in college so we both decided to go back to school”* (AX3). Other graduates acknowledged that, although time spent in school was structured to not interfere with work, it still cut into time normally reserved for the family, *“because you had to then go at 7:00 to 9:45 at night when you should be home with your family”* (AX6). One graduate spoke about working, having a family, and going to school all at the same time, and noted: *“It was just an all-consuming kind of thing.... You look back on it and go, ‘How the heck did I ever get time to do all of that?’”* (AX2).

Of the 13 female graduate participants, three were single mothers, solely responsible for supporting their children. When commenting on the particular challenges of the students in the ACCBD program, one employer participant observed: *“Yes, and most of them, particularly in [town], are single mothers, mothers who are trying to work. So it’s very difficult for them to manage those family issues as well as trying to pursue their education”* (AY2).

Graduates—both those with and without children—reported additional stressors related to family, such as deaths of family members, personal and family-related health

issues, caring for aging parents, and issues with in-laws—all while managing a job and their studies. One graduate stated, *“I had some family members dying ...all kinds of other problems and I just thought, ‘I’ll never get my degree at this rate’”* (CX5).

In sum, graduates cited multiple family- and work-related issues that impacted their ability to successfully pursue further education; that is, maintaining steady employment while trying to raise a family or handle the issues of extended family prevented them from pursuing education beyond the two-year degree. A further contributing factor that will be discussed below: Work and family also tended to tie the participants to their homes and kept them from relocating to attend a four-year college or university.

Relocation Not Possible

Location of the program was a major factor for many participants in considering what college they could feasibly attend. When asked what most influenced her decision to select the ACCBD, one graduate articulated this factor well: *“Location—my job is here. My son and I were here. I owned a house at the time. There were no options”* (AX1). Another single mother graduate responded, *“So I didn’t have to leave the county”* (BX1). Others responded: *“I knew that it would probably be the best thing for me: considering location”* (BX3), and, *“Location is a big one for me”* (BX4). Another succinctly responded, *“simply location”* (CX4). In fact, because of this sense of being place-bound, most graduates indicated that other degree programs were not realistic options. Employer participants concurred, and one opined, *“It just makes sense to employ these folks that we have right here. They have roots here. They live here. They’ve grown up here. They go to school here. Let’s put them in a job”* (CY1). Yet another employer

from a different location noted bluntly, “*Her family lives here so she’s going to stay here*” (AY1).

Some employer participants noted that they cannot select employees based on the fact that they are local. Nonetheless, they stated their preference for doing just that: “*You know, that is something that I think most employers would rather have, but we can’t do that*” (AY2). Overall employers perceived that the ACCBD helped to keep people and jobs in the community. In sum, although it is clearly intertwined with work and family, graduates sited location as the most important factor when selecting a degree.

Adequate Educational Preparation

In response to the question, please describe how your previous education prepared you for the ACCBD, most graduate responded that they had adequate educational preparation to begin a bachelor’s degree program. When asked about how previous education had served to prepare her for an ACCBD, in reference to her two-year program, one graduate responded, “*They just did what I think they had to do. It got my math skills up. It got my writing skills up—reading, comp, all of it. It just got me where I needed to be*” (AX1). Two other graduates had similar responses: “*Yeah, it worked right in. I mean, there was no problem at all*” (AX2). “*And so it really did fall into place.... I think it prepared me well, the classes’ curriculum, too*” (AX5). Two others also concurred that their previous education prepared them well for the ACCBD: “*Definitely. It was the same faculty also and just a narrow focus on each of topics that we learned on a very broad level the first 2 years, so I felt comfortable*” (CX2). “*I was prepared. I was very well prepared. I didn’t have any problems with the program itself*” (BX5). Finally,

one graduate with a bachelor degree in economics, responded, *“I felt very well prepared”* (BX4).

A few students did need to pick up additional classes before starting the ACCBD program: *“As soon as they advertised it [ACCBD], I jumped on it because I was ready for it. The only thing I had to do then was go back and pick up all those classes [mathematics and science] from the AA portion. So I did have to go back and pick up those classes”* (BX1). Another graduate noted, *“You can take some six bridging courses. Take some accounting, statistics, some general business or something—really just the very fundamentals of business in six courses and you can transfer into business”* (CX4). With regard to her prerequisite courses, another student noted, *“I was short about 14 hours”* (BX3).

Of the graduate group, only four felt that their previous education inadequately prepared them for a bachelor’s degree program. One graduate, who was returning to school after a nearly 40-year hiatus, stated, *“I don’t think I was prepared for it. It was like relearning ... all over again.... I graduated back in the late ‘60s”* (BX3). In contrast, a much younger graduate who had moved directly from a two-year program to a ACCBD, commented, *“My first semester at [college] I absolutely bombed, because I wasn’t expecting to work that hard. I was just kind of thinking that it would be a little bit harder than the previous year kind of thing”* (CX1). Still another middle-aged graduate reflected, *“My previous education did prepare me to a small degree for the program, but to a greater degree, it was the workplace environment that provided me with the opportunities to apply the education required into diploma programs”* (CX5).

In summary, most graduates felt that their two-year educational background adequately prepared them for the ACCBD. Three graduates, however, needed to pick up additional courses, and four specifically noted that they did not feel adequately prepared for the ACCBD.

Other Perceived Barriers of the ACCBD

In addition to these aforementioned barriers (most of which were resolved by the ACCBD program), a few other barriers were noted with respect to pursuing the baccalaureate degree; most of these could be considered self-limiting or outside-limiting factors. One such instance was the family's desire for the graduate to attend a major university: *"My family was really pushing me towards going to a large university"* (CX2). Age was also noted by a number of graduates. Said one: *"I even had a [coworker] who said to me, 'you're too old. Don't even think about working on your degree'"* (CX5). Another noted: *"I'm older than I guess what used to be the typical college student. Now they're getting a lot older"* (AX2); however, one graduate found that the older students in the college helped her feel more at ease: *"More of a nontraditional student population which really helped out, too, because the population of the student—the background of the student body here is quite a bit older than just out of high school"* (AX4). Another graduate participant, near retirement, cited age as a problem *"because it's harder as you get older to learn or to retain what you learn."* She continued, however: *"So my joke is, am I going to retire first or am I going to get the degree?"* (BX7).

On a more personal level, most of the graduates had to overcome some perceived barriers to complete their degree. The most prominent of these barriers was attending college as an older student, and to a lesser extent, doubt about one's educational

background. Finally, in one case, a family member expressed the wish that the graduate attend a university rather than a community college.

Summary of Perceived Barriers

The graduate study participants identified a number of significant barriers to continuing their education and attaining a baccalaureate degree. Most of these participants were employed full time and had families to support. Their jobs and family obligations made it implausible to relocate for the sole purpose of attending a college or university. It is not surprising, therefore, that location (albeit tied to work and family) emerged as one of the most important factors that graduates took into account when choosing a degree program, and it impacted all of them in some way. Educational background and internal/outside-limiting factors were only noted by a few. Most students felt their previous education had prepared them to be successful with the ACCBD program with the exception of four graduates, and three students had needed to take additional coursework before starting the ACCBD. In addition to not being academically prepared, two students reported receiving a negative reaction (one by family and the other by a coworker) to their plans to attend an ACCBD program. Thus, it appears that educational background was not a major factor for most students attending an ACCBD program. In part, this was successfully addressed by college bridge programs that offer prerequisite courses to help students prepare for the academic rigors of a baccalaureate program.

Thus, small or large, perceived or real, internally or externally based, graduates needed to overcome a number of barriers before they could commit to and successfully complete an ACCBD program. These ACCBD graduates generally mimic typical

community college/professional/technical students: They tend to be older, employed full time, and with family obligations. However, in one significant way they are different: the majority of ACCBD students in my study, unlike many community college students (Lumina Foundation, 2009), perceived themselves as being educationally prepared to make the leap to a baccalaureate degree from their two-year degree.

Community colleges, by their nature, are familiar with the specific needs of nontraditional students and have made accommodations to serve this population and help them to succeed. The next theme addresses the accommodations that the college made in order to serve nontraditional students.

Theme 2: Relevant Programming

The second theme to emerge, which, again, was primarily in response to the question of why did you decide to enroll in the ACCBD program rather than a program with a similar focus located at a university, was that the graduates generally viewed community colleges as offering programming suitable to meet their educational needs in conjunction with their work experience (see Figure 2 below).

It [her ACCBD college] was just a little more familiar than going to the regular university. I was at [regional university], which was a concrete university on top of a pretty cold hill. You didn't feel it was appealing or welcoming. I spent one semester there ... but it just seemed a lot less welcoming. (CX3)

When compared against a traditional university's bachelor degree program, the graduates' perceptions of the ACCBD program included the following: (a) smaller class sizes, (b) lower cost, (c) more accessible faculty, and (d) better connection to the corresponding industry. Each of these perceptions will be discussed below.

On a less positive note, graduates perceived universities as having more prestige than ACCBD colleges. About half of the graduates reported attending a university in their educational career, which added validity to their comparisons of the two types of programs and institutions. As the above quote shows, at least one graduate reported leaving the ACCBD program to attend a university but then returning to the ACCBD program to complete [her] degree.

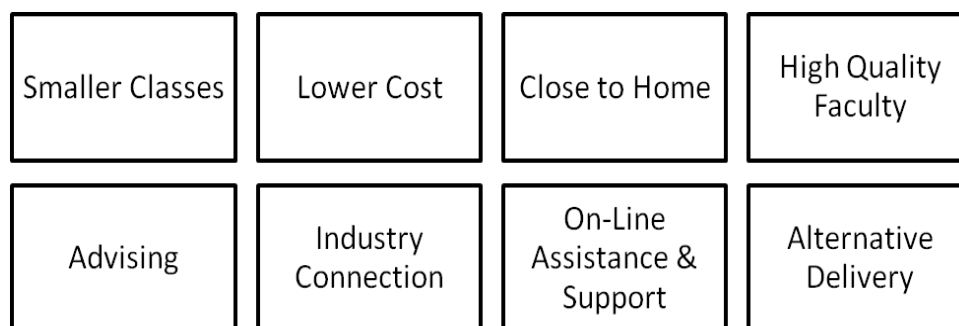


Figure 2. Theme 2: ACCBD program accommodations.

Class Size

At least half of the graduates indicated that the smaller class size associated with community colleges was a significant advantage over the larger class sizes generally found in universities. One graduate said, *“I think the one-on-one interaction you get from a smaller class size and a smaller campus is far better than the university setting”* (AX6). This graduate, who had also earned her associate degree at the same college, was discussing the transition from her two-year program to her bachelor’s program noted:

What I liked the best was the small classes [re: associate’s degree].... They all knew my name. I mean, I have to tell you that by the time I got into the bachelor’s program it was so neat. The first day of class the teacher goes, “Oh, everyone’s here. Let’s get started.” No nothing. No role call. I mean, they took attendance, and you knew who they were, but there was never mispronouncing your name. It was never who are you? (AX1)

This familiarity with the campus as well as the faculty and students enhanced this student's overall experience. Many other graduates also reported small class sizes as a positive attribute. One graduate commented: *"Classes were small. I don't know if I ever had a class with more than 20 students in it"* (AX3). Another noted, *"The other benefit was the small classes. I was with the same people, the same 15 people for 2 years"* (CX2).

Graduates from all three colleges reported small classroom sizes, typically 20 or less, as stated by this graduate, *"My bachelor's program class size was anywhere from 13 to 18 was an average class size. I think when I graduated we had seven of us that actually had been together the entire time"* (AX6). This graduate went on to say that the small class size enhanced the learning environment and provided more access to the instructors: *"So I believe the class size and really being able to talk to a teacher if we had a problem with something was really beneficial"* (AX6). Another graduate concurred; when commenting on the benefits, [he] noted: *"The smaller class size and more attention from teachers, and just a smaller-knit community"* (CX3). This graduate had attended both a university and a community college, and he also noted that the smaller classes at the community college offered better access to the professors.

I knew what community college was like and I knew what the university environment was like. To me, they are essentially the same that you have to put your work into the class and you can get the best out of it. The community colleges have the strength that if you have a good professor, which [his ACCBD college] does, you have a small class and you have better access to that professor. Universities also have good professors, but the classes are bigger, not as easily accessible. (BX5)

The graduate quoted below had also previously attended a university, and in articulating the difference between the ACCBD program and a university, noted that the ACCBD

college provided the appropriate motivation for her to succeed, which she had not gotten from the university:

I am glad it was small because it was a lot less intimidating and you start to recognize the same people. You can make friends easier that way and get to know the faculty a bit more. It's not like a line-up of 20 people after class to ask a question. There are 20 people in the class, so maybe there are two people in the class and you can get more support that way. And also the teachers know who you are, like I felt a little bit—at first I felt a little bit weird because if I didn't show up to a class, I felt like the professor would know, whereas at the [regional university] you can get away with it, which might have been why I didn't do as well there—because I was motivated to succeed at (her ACCBD college). (CX2)

The student below described this impersonal characteristic of the regional university, which she attended prior to attending her ACCBD program, in contrast to the ACCBD program as follows:

And it seems like the teachers here or the instructors are more attainable, like you can talk to them more than you could at [regional university], the university level, I thought. Even though you are still in contact with your professors there, I just felt like I was a number at [university] and here it is more you're a person. (BX6)

In sum, the graduate participants overwhelmingly identified the small class size offered at ACCBD programs as an advantage over a university's typically larger class sizes. The advantages that they identified included a closer-knit community, better access to instructors, and being more motivated because of the personalized attention they received from their instructors. Although class size was typically reported at about 20, one graduate stated a slightly higher number: “*And I really like the small 30-40 people atmosphere that we get with the community college*” (BX4). Understandably, at least three graduates who were exclusively taking online classes did not mention class size as an issue.

Affordability

Graduates felt that the costs of the ACCBD programs were appropriate, which was less than that of a university. Only five graduates specifically referred to the cost of the ACCBD as being a major factor, and in two cases, the graduates' employers had covered the costs incurred. The graduate quoted below indicated that cost played a minor role in his decision to attend an ACCBD program, and he noted that it was somewhat less than the cost of a university:

I know the cost at [ACCBD college] was a little bit less than the universities. So that always helps out, too, if you can save a little bit of money, but my opinion is the degree is more important than the money that goes into it. (AX6)

Yet another graduate who had received his bachelor's degree from a university before enrolling in the ACCBD program noted a significant cost savings: *"I'm paying junior college prices to get a bachelor's degree, which is probably a 50% to 75% savings by the time you look at the tuition costs"* (BX2). Another graduate who had previously attended a university was unclear why he had chosen the ACCBD program over attending a university, but concluded that it was probably the cost: *"Probably one of them [decisions to attend the ACCBD program] was the cost was cheaper than the other schools"* (BX5). Finally, one graduate, who was a single parent, was very clear on her reasons for choosing the ACCBD program: *"location, cost"* (BX1). She then talked about the high cost of private colleges.

Appropriate Faculty

In addition to the accessibility of faculty, nearly all of the graduates also noted that their ACCBD program had quality, supportive, and knowledgeable faculty.

This graduate stated that the faculty members were still willing to help even after graduation:

I just believe in the faculty here at the college and the support that they give even after you've graduated. You can still go and approach the instructors with questions or problems and they are more than willing to help. (AX4)

On a similar note, another described the faculty as wanting you to succeed:

The business department, I love all of them. I don't think I met one teacher in the business department that I thought did a bad job. You know, they were always— You could tell they were dedicated to the students. You know, they wanted them to be better. They wanted to help in any way they could. It wasn't like, "Oh, my office hours are only 2 hours every other day" or something like that. It was if you need something you got a hold of them and they would meet you whenever. So I thought that was really cool. (AX2)

The graduate below identified the lead instructor in the program as being a strength of the program as well as the flexibility given with work issues:

[lead instructor] taught most of the 300- and 400-level classes. I think he's a good instructor. That was a good thing. He is the head of the program, and I think he teaches the brunt of the classes, so that was a strength. Flexibility, you know, he was able to work with you when you had issues come up—work issues or that type of thing. (AX3)

Another graduate appreciated the support and flexibility allowed [her] when medical issues prevented her from attending class:

[The] staff and the instructors at [college] are wonderful. I had some medical things going on, but they worked with me. I was able to make up even after missing 2 months of school one semester. I was able to make up all my work, and the lowest grade I got was a B. So I felt like I did awesome. I couldn't have done it without their help. They were just wonderful to me. (AX5)

Yet another graduate noted the faculty as being a major strength in the ACCBD program:

I think the instructors are the strength of the program. They have very good instructors. They have been in education and hygiene education for a long time and they have high standards. They are involved with the

students. I got a lot of feedback constantly. This is no face-to-face kind of interaction. This is strictly e-mails and letters and that kind of—writing papers and responses and stuff like that. They respond quickly and they are attentive. When you get your material back, you can tell they have taken the time to truly read your material and give you a lot of good feedback for you to grow upon. So I think that their attention to the student is excellent, and that's definitely a major strength in the program. (BX2)

One graduate compared her ACCBD program to her current graduate program at a university and noted that the communication and accessibility of the faculty had been better in her ACCBD program: “*The communication was awesome between student and instructor*” (BX3). Another spoke of the time and attention that the ACCBD faculty members are willing to provide:

My perception of some university teachers—and not all—is if you don't get it, there is somebody else who does, so they don't spend as much time with you, I don't think, as they should. And I think the teachers here, if you have a question or something, they are willing to sit down and help you with that to make sure you understand that. (AX6)

For this graduate, one strength of the program was the faculty and their ability to teach from a “real world” perspective:

The strength of the program ... is that some of the teachers have real-life experience, that they have not been just in professorship position, but they have really worked for corporations. And they teach subject matter by their life experience. (BX5)

The faculty's support and willingness to help influenced this graduate's decision with regard to what college to attend for her bachelor's degree:

They [ACCBD faculty] were excellent teachers in the technology area. They knew their information, and they seemed that they really wanted to help the students. I really didn't get that feel from the previous college, junior college, that I had just—I didn't get any of that support. (BX7)

Another echoed the same attribute: “*great faculty that have great student-faculty relationships; many supportive networks.... They were all really supportive in helping out each other, the students, and the faculty*” (CX2).

The overwhelming response of the graduates was that the ACCBD faculty was accessible, supportive, and knowledgeable of real world expectations, and they were invested in the success of their students. Some minor concerns were expressed with regard to one faculty member at one college who taught all of the classes; whereas other graduates perceived lack of breadth as a problem, still others considered the use of the same instructor as an advantage. ACCBD graduates also appreciated the real-world experience the faculty brought to their instruction, which is covered in the next section on industry connection, and the key role faculty play in making that connection.

Industry Connection

Graduates also felt that the ACCBD programs were better connected to industry than similar university programs. One of the key elements was that many of the faculty members have real-world experience, direct industry connections, as well as use an applied curriculum that resembles the workplace. This allowed graduates to apply the theory to practical applications. In addition, some graduates were connected through internships and industry partnerships.

A few graduates specifically identified the advantage of being taught by faculty with real-world experience and curricula that specifically addressed the industry and was pertinent in the workplace itself. One graduate, who had returned to college to attain a business-oriented ACCBD, expressed this faculty connection to industry as follows: “*the strength—basis of the faculty in that they are being somewhat directed by the industries*

here. So it was more a kind of microenvironment for learning rather than the traditional university setting” (AX4). One graduate felt that this real-world experience helped [him] understand theory: “And the theory end of it [ACCBD faculty] has got a lot of good world experience. He’s worn many hats, I guess, in his professional career. So he could relate and instruct based on his worldly experience” (AX3). Yet another graduate described the benefit of faculty coming directly from industry: “I think some of their faculty that they have is really great. They come from industry themselves. They are still working mainstream and then coming part time, and it gives it a dynamic and interesting classroom environment” (CX4). One instructor, a General Electric executive, was mentioned specifically:

Other strengths of the program—one particular professor ... was a General Electric executive, and he had a lot of real-life experience that he was sharing with us. He was teaching project management. He had experience in project management from Saudi Arabia and India, and he had big projects from \$60 million and up. He gave us very interesting differences between—cultural differences; things that are done in Japan versus Saudi Arabia and India. (BX5)

The above examples indicate the strong industry focus brought in by faculty. At one of the sites, four out of six graduates named a particular faculty member as having excellent inside knowledge of industry. It appears that many faculty members in the ACCBD programs were bringing real-world experience to the classroom, thus, in essence, bringing industry into the curriculum and the classroom, which then benefits graduates who planned to immediately take their newly acquired knowledge into the workforce.

At one site, three out of six graduates described a real-world simulation exercise carried out in the classroom that was as near as possible to a real-world experience. It was described by one graduate:

And then the last month of the class we actually ran our own business through a computer simulation, going against other schools and programs. We were a small school, and I think there were about 2,000 other schools. We had to use it through 12 classes of four teams. And all four of our teams scored in the top 300 in the country. So as far as the teaching application and the theory, I think the theory that we learned—and this was the very last class in our program. So this was pretty much the last—it was our capstone course. It was the last one. And we took everything that we had learned, all the theory that we had learned before, and applied it to the application of running this business. Like I said, all four teams were in the top 300, and we were going against big schools. We were going against master's programs as well. So I thought it did a great job just all the way around pulling everything together. I thought it was great that we ended the program with that computer simulation. (AX6)

Two other graduates—both younger and with less life and work experience—also described this simulation as concretely turning theory into application. At a different site, graduates completed a similar exercise for existing businesses with review and feedback from those businesses. One graduate commented:

That's a course, an exit course, a capstone course. You actually have to do a consolidated project where you launch your own business for a real business. The business owners, they come in and critique what you've done for them, and they actually have to sign off on your project if they're happy with it and if they accept it, etc. So that's great. (CX4)

This graduate went on to say that most of his classes had some kind of real world component:

Yes, pretty much all the courses—all the projects except for one course, which was case based. I think most of the other ones where you actually had to find an industry or a business to work with. So you go up to them and ask them, "Hey, this is my business or my course. Do you have some area in your business that we can help you out with?" For example, we had done one for information technology. We worked with a local garage company and sort of serviced them and did some financial stuff with them. We created an information technology program for them, which included [unintelligible] their process and [helped to] sort of streamline their business. So that's one example. Other examples we've done is we worked with a nonprofit organization which is—for an event for recognizing cultural diversity; that was kind of a cool event. So we had to do a project

for them ... [to] make this organization stand out more, because there were a couple of competitors in this area, so we sort of worked out the market in general—what the strengths were of this company. We created a framework for them, so they could go forward and market their business better. We gave them some examples and some tools to do so. (CX4)

From the same school, another graduate had a similar experience that she described as a strength of the ACCBD program. Every class in her program required her to have a direct industry experience, and by the time she graduated, she felt that she had a good idea of how to approach a business when applying for a job:

I think that going in and interviewing and actually doing things, I was more comfortable speaking with and knowing who I wanted to talk to. I don't know necessarily if I would have had that opportunity at [Local University]. Like if I was to go to [Local University], it's just that every class we went to we were going into this business because we had to do a different business for every class and we were talking to management. We weren't talking to the front line workers. We were talking to the top of the chain. So I think that because we were forced to do that every semester, five classes a semester, you gain that confidence that you go in and you know who you want to speak to and what you want out of it. So I think that definitely helped in the fact that—like even with my job now, when I was applying at places, every person turned me and walked me back out the door and said, "You have to apply online. We don't take applications. You need to apply online and turned me back out." I was like, "No, no, no. I want to talk to—" "like I knew I needed to talk to the manager of the branch. I knew that I needed to talk to the manager. So it was like pushing my way that way is what actually got me the job, not the online. So I think that knowing how businesses work, because we were working with them so closely, I think, helped in the end. (CX1)

A graduate from a different school had a similar reaction when describing her assignment to meet with real businesses and start a project with them:

We had to go out ... to a business and talk to these people. It was easier for me to apply it to my money[her personal finances] because it's what is really happening. And things that really transpire if you are going to start a business of your own or the problems that they run across. (AX5)

In addition to attaining real-world experience from the faculty and these field simulations and assignments, graduates also remarked that they learned from each other

as nearly all of them were working and had life experiences they could bring to the classroom. Said one graduate:

I had some very good experiences because most of the people [students] had work experience, so the questions were related to their life experiences. You can share with other people different ideas or different problems that they share from the workplace depending on the courses that we were taking—whether it was a business law or an Internet security class. People would say that my company would do this or I work at a company where we have this issue and we had real life examples. (BX5)

This was real life that he could relate to. It's "*applicable to real life. It wasn't an abstract idea, but it was something that you could relate to much easier with different examples from real life and real people*" (BX5).

Two graduates, each from a different site, had gone through their programs as part of a partnership between their employer and the ACCBD college. One graduate remarked: "*They're proeducation here. I believe they are partnered with the college, and they hire a lot of the interns in the IT area*" (BX7). In the second case, the partnership between the employer and the school was targeted towards potentially displaced workers: "*You need to understand that [the ACCBD College] and [graduate's employer] worked collaboratively to put on or to present an education opportunity. ... There were a few of us that jumped on the bandwagon*" (CX5).

While internships typically are part of an ACCBD program, only three graduates mentioned them, and one noted that an internship was unnecessary in her case because she was already working in the field: "*They partnered with businesses where students would go and intern to get some experience that they didn't have. I never needed to take advantage of that, but that seemed to be a big focus*" (BX1).

The ACCBD programs had a strong industry focus, faculty often came from the industry, which the graduates felt was a real advantage as they were able to draw from their own experience (i.e., the real world) as opposed to teaching from a purely theoretical or academic standpoint. These faculty members, then, also were able to incorporate real-world business applications into their curriculum. In some cases, this is done by developing complex simulations; in other cases, they had the students complete projects that required engagement with the business community. Although I found it somewhat perplexing that only a few graduates discussed internships, I deduced that this was probably due to the fact that most graduates already had jobs in the field that they were studying.

Summary

This section described three attributes that graduates perceived as being strengths of the community colleges: smaller classes, appropriate faculty, and industry connection. The smaller class size allows for greater faculty accessibility, and from most of the graduates' perspectives, they felt that the faculty was overall more supportive. In addition, the faculty having a connection with businesses in the industry itself was seen as very important. This real-world experience underscored the program's focus on industry as well as offering curriculum with simulations and required business interaction and partnerships with ACCBD colleges and industry. To a lesser degree, graduates also mentioned lower cost as a benefit. About half of the graduates had at some point attended a university and were able to make these comparisons based on their own experiences.

Theme 3: Prepared for Graduate School

In response to a question regarding how well the graduate felt prepared for additional education, the response was unanimously positive. One out of the 18 interviewed had obtained a Juris Doctorate degree and had just passed the bar examination a few weeks prior to our interview. At the time of the interview, at least five

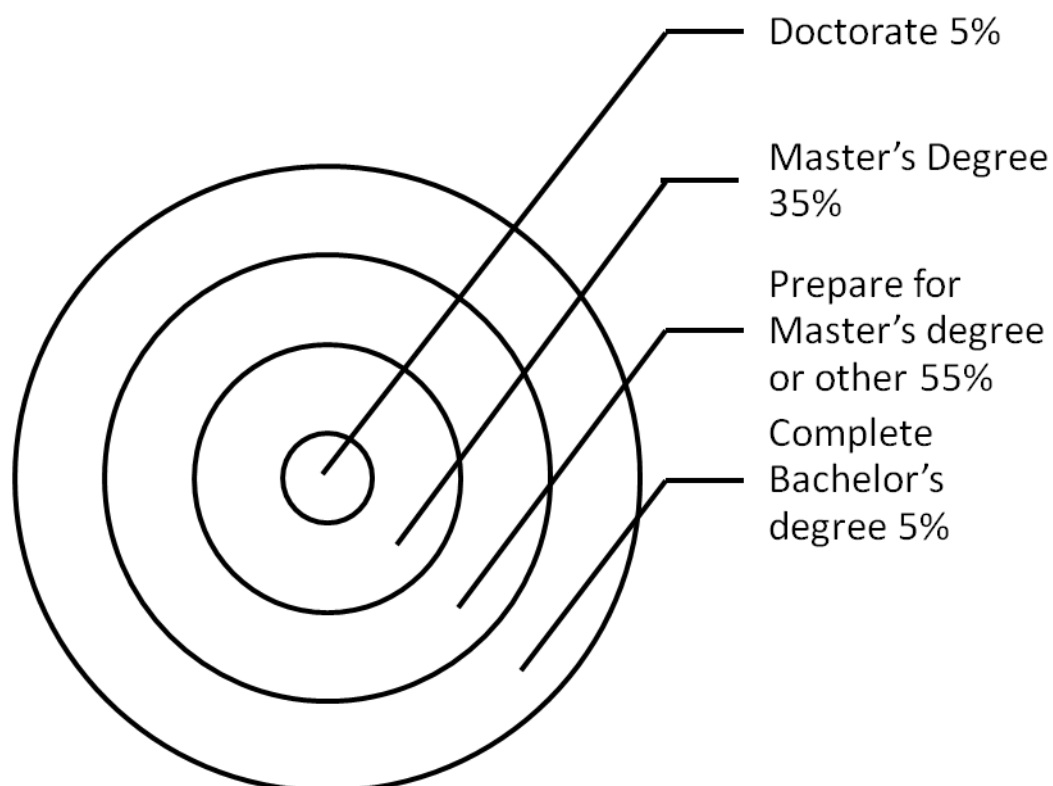


Figure 3. Theme 3: Preparation for additional education.

of the graduates were in the process of attaining a master's degree, and one was working towards a certification (e.g., Certified Financial Planner). Nine graduates stated that they were considering pursuing a master's degrees; only one—who was, in fact, still in the process of graduating—said she was not considering additional education (see Figure 3 above).

The most recent and one of the oldest graduates responded, “*I understand that there are no limits. The only limits are in your mind*” (BX7); although she was not currently planning to pursue a master’s degree, she nonetheless felt that the ACCBD had prepared her:

I have no doubt that I could do it.[Master’s degree]. I’m now getting at the end that I think I want to take some of my skills and my knowledge, and I want to put them to use in the real world. I want to give back. I’m at that point in my life that I now have been very blessed, and I want to give back either doing volunteer work or do something to help other people, because I’ve had a lot of people help me. So I’ll just tell you this: I’ve had a lot of people at the building where I live or my bosses or my past bosses, when I struggled with certain classes like math or something, they would sit down and try to help me. So I feel like now it’s my turn to go out and try to pay it forward. (BX7)

The law school graduate had this to say regarding her preparation for law school:

I was more than prepared. I have to tell you, I was very pleased. I mean, it’s socially known and especially when you work in the legal community. It is not an easy experience. It’s a tough experience.... I really was surprised at how much I had learned and how much I was pulling out of my brain from things I had learned at [the ACCBD college]. I truly was. (AX1)

Another graduate was just beginning an advanced degree program and felt that, between his own experience and his ACCBD education, he was well prepared:

I was admitted into the [university] continuing or distance education program as a grad special.... If I could have entered into a master’s program right after, I would have. I felt like I was prepared enough to do that. I felt I had an understanding of business enough to do that. I had been working in the business realm while I was still actually in school, and I was working for another business in town. The coursework that I received [at ACCBD] and everything else, I was comfortable enough moving right into a master’s if I could have. (AX6)

Of note, this graduate was preparing for the GMAT in order to transfer to a different university.

The following student, who had a bachelor's degree prior to attending the ACCBD college, felt that the program prepared her for graduate studies:

My graduate work is going great.... It's [her ACCBD college] getting a reputation for itself, and the fact that I am the first graduate from that school, I think, to get into a prestigious university [is indicative of this].... But I am also making that university better because I am doing great in my graduate work. And I don't know if it is just me as a student finally having my time after raising three kids, or if it was [her ACCBD college] or a little of both. (BX2)

Yet another student had recently been accepted into a master's program:

My transcripts were sent to them. They reviewed them. They looked to see if it was from an accredited college or university and they had no questions. I submitted it, they reviewed it, and they came back and said I was accepted. (BX1)

One student, who currently is enrolled in a master's program, stated: *"It definitely prepared me."* In addition, when asked if there were any problems with her acceptance into the university, she responded: *"I did everything online. I applied online. My grades were excellent. I had my letters of recommendation. It was pretty easy"* (BX1). She also noted that the university had no problems accepting her ACCBD degree.

The quote below is the only graduate (out of the six who had or were in the process of continuing on to graduate school) who did report problems with the university accepting his ACCBD degree:

The only problem is because [the ACCBD college] is not accepted— ... I guess, it is called the Association of Universities; like that—some association [that his ACCBD college] is not on that association, and it makes it really hard for me to be accepted into the master's program. (CX4)

He continued, nonetheless, by remarking that he knew other ACCBD graduates who had been accepted into local universities, *"But I know that other graduates from here have*

gone to [local university] to do MBAs, and that hasn't been a problem for them. So I was thinking perhaps it was different programs or something like that."

Considering Graduate School

Half of the graduates interviewed indicated interest in attaining a master's degree, and most of them felt that their ACCBD degree had properly prepared them. The graduate quoted below noted that currently she was too busy to begin a master's program, but she has done some research and said it appeared that the regional universities would apply some credits from her ACCBD toward a master's degree: "*Well, at the point where we graduated over here in '04, everybody [regional universities] gave us 15 credits[toward a Master's Degree] just for finishing out at [ACCBD college]*" (AX4). This graduate was also considering pursuing a master's degree in the future, and when asked whether she felt that her ACCBD program had prepared her for graduate school, she responded:

I do. I feel like I am prepared. I don't want to wait too long, you know, to do like any of that program. It's got to be something I think I would just jump in and start, because I think if you stay out of it too long then you aren't prepared. They did such a good job of preparing me there in the bachelor's program that I think I could just jump in and get going. I think it would be a smooth transition. (AX5)

This graduate had not been accepted into a very competitive specialty doctoral program but felt, nonetheless, that his ACCBD had prepared him for graduate school:

I think the bachelor's in applied science they [doctoral program] view differently than a bachelor's in science degree in talking to some of the schools now. So that has, I think, held me back a little bit. If I was going to stay with [current field] or with that field, I think it definitely did prepare me as some of the master's degrees I started looking at online at the programs— ...The degree definitely prepared me for the entry into those programs, those graduate programs. (BX4)

This graduate's comments may indicate that the ACCBD degree was less effective when applying for admission into unrelated fields or specialty schools. If he were to stay in the same field, he felt he would not encounter this problem.

This graduate was considering pursuing a Master's of Business Administration, and he felt he was prepared for graduate school. Specifically, he felt that he had learned how to successfully take online classes and how to schedule himself:

I have considered and am considering additional education going probably for my master's ... but I am considering possibly an MBA. The experience here has prepared me in the sense that I am used to taking online classes, that I am prepared to work that into my schedule, and that I'll probably be looking at an MBA program that is web based—especially now that many more schools offer such programs. (BX5)

He also expressed some concern with regard to universities recognizing his ACCBD degree but was otherwise confident that most would already have a process in place for dealing with this kind of degree:

Most universities—or good universities—have programs where that [the ACCBD] is only one of the considerations. They usually have an essay or other subjects where you can prove to them that you are worthy to attend their school. If they don't have such a thing, usually they are not that good of a school. (BX5)

This graduate stated her goal for graduate school: “Yes, a master's degree. That's my goal in 10 years to start it” (BX6). When asked why she felt the ACCBD prepared for a master's degree, she responded:

Because the education that they've given me has increased my knowledge in the field—not just in treating patients—but dealing with other people and the diseases that are involved, the education that you have to go through with your patients and clients and students.

This graduate stated that she knew at least one other graduate from her program who had started a master's program. She seemed somewhat unclear if her ACCBD had prepared her to move to the master's level.

The quoted graduate below was considering a master's degree and felt prepared to move to the master's level and also thought that the college was very helpful to those graduates who wanted to earn master's degrees:

Yes, I thought about additional education. I think they [ACCBD college] did a really good job, especially towards the end of the degree of letting you know your options. At the time that I was finishing up my degree, like the first cohort that had just graduated the year before, some of them had already been accepted to master's programs, which was obviously a big success for [ACCBD college] and the program. And obviously they let us know about it because they were still trying to promote it. So I felt like if I wanted to, then I could...—that if that was a path I wanted to take, I could have. Even now, if I applied at a grad school, I would have the support from them to still help me out. I would also be able to do it on my own merit. (CX3)

The following quoted graduate planed to eventually earn a doctorate in her chosen field of study. She believed her ACCBD degree would transfer to the regional university. She also believed she was ready to begin a master's program but has some concerns about research and statistics. When asked if she was considering additional education, she replied simply, "I say yes." When asked if she felt prepared she said:

I am hoping that I am so well prepared. But I want to enter the master's in nursing program. I am concerned with stats and the research requirements.... One of the reasons I'm taking the program is to help me towards a doctorate in nursing. (CX5)

When asked whether her ACCBD degree was accepted at a regional university, she said, "Yes, it is. And that's why I have capped all my course objectives—what I did for each course; so I have the academics" (CX5). This graduate had a clear vision of her next educational steps, and her experience in the ACCBD program clearly motivated her.

In fact, many of the graduates clearly were motivated by the ACCBD program and viewed it as a stepping stone to graduate school. Advanced degree programs generally accept bachelor degrees as long as the school's accreditation criteria are met (in most cases, schools are minimally looking for regional accreditation), and the student satisfies the prerequisites and grade requirements for her/his chosen program (C. R. Grothe, personal communication April 15, 2009). More importantly, the graduates themselves felt prepared and confident in their ability to successfully pursue an advanced degree. The next theme covers delivery methods, program schedule, location, and advising methods.

Theme 4: Use of Alternative Delivery Methods

This section describes the alternative delivery methods used by the ACCBD and the graduates' perceptions of those methods. The graduates generally felt that alternative delivery methods were sufficient for their needs. All three of the ACCBD sites offer some form of alternative delivery designed for nontraditional students. These methods included night classes, online classes, interactive television, compressed schedules, flexible schedules, courses at worksites, summer classes, and in some cases, hybrid classes, that is, a combination of two or more of these methods. The diagram in Figure 4, demonstrates how these alternative delivery methods are interconnected. The graduates reported that the ACCBD colleges also had student support systems in place to help meet the needs of students using these alternative delivery systems. In two sites, all the graduates reported alternative delivery, while only one graduate from the third site reported them. Combining the graduates from all three sites, 14 out of the 18 graduates reported using

these alternative delivery methods. The two primary methods were night classes and online delivery.

Night Classes

Six graduates reported that they attended classes at night primarily to accommodate their work schedules. The graduate quoted here was a single parent and also was working full time: *“There were very few classes in the day that I was required to take, but otherwise, they were pretty much all at night”* (AX1). This second quote was from a student who preferred daytime classes until she started working:

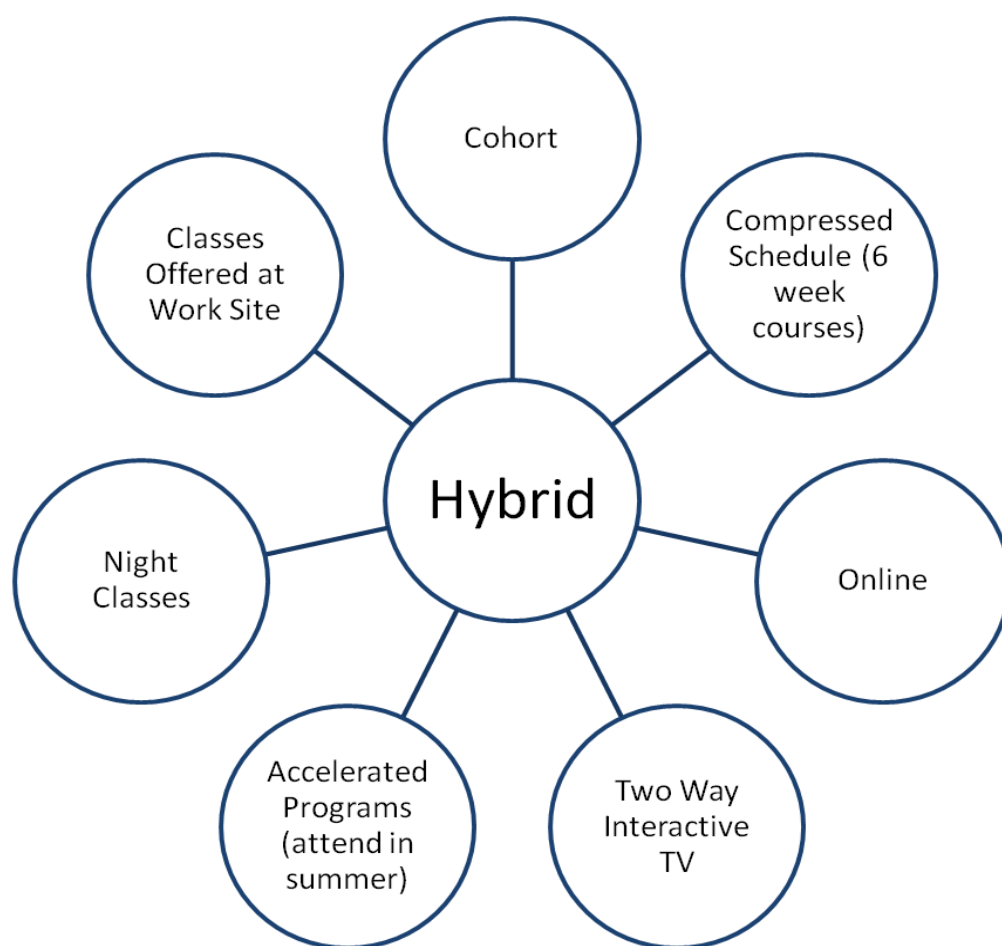


Figure 4. Theme 4: Use of alternative methods of program delivery.

And then, as you got into the 300- and 400-level classes, then it was mostly at night. So if you weren't a working person, then that was kind of a pain in the butt, because you had to then go at 7:00 to 9:45 at night when you should be home with your family. But it catered a lot to the working students, which is good, but it just depends on which side of the fence you're on. I mean, at first I didn't like it but then I started working. I wasn't working when I first started school here. So when I started, it was like, "Okay, I'll wake up." (AX2)

The student quoted below also worked during the day—four days a week 10 hours per day. She also found the ACCBD program appealing:

You know, the schedule here was good. I have no idea if universities put too many 300- and 400- level classes at night, Because I'm doing the 410s, most of my classes are at night. I understand that's one of [school]'s selling points is that they cater to the nontraditional students and have classes at night and that type of thing. (AX3)

Similarly, attending her ACCDB classes at night made things easier for this working mother of three: *"I finished it all up basically at night, which was definitely a plus"*

(AX4). Yet another full-time worker benefited from night classes: *"Where you can take classes after you get off work? Yes, you're working until late at night, but you're not missing work. And the teachers understand"* (AX6).

All of these graduates quoted above were from the same site. In most cases, these graduates would not have been able to attend regular daytime classes. The evening schedule offered them the ability to continue to work while earning their ACCBD degree. These students did not indicate that they would have preferred an online option, which is discussed next.

Online Program Delivery

Six graduates reported completing their ACCBD program completely or mostly online. Most of them reported that the online method was necessary due to their work schedules. One graduate, who at the beginning of the program worried about her limited

computer skills, became a strong advocate of the online program and was now in the process of completing an online master's program:

At first it was terrifying because I had never taken an online course before. You know, all of them were face-to-face. I was a little nervous about my computer literacy, I should say, but it was an incredible experience. I feel that online is much better for students to get to know each other and to get to know the instructor, whereas with face-to-face, you don't get that. (BX3)

As a full-time employee and a single mother, one graduate chose online as a best option for her: “*You had the option of either going to a class or doing an online class. Or you could do it blended. I just chose all online*” (BX1). Currently enrolled in a prestigious graduate school, this graduate was deeply gratified by her online experience at an ACCBD college:

And I'm walked through the program, and I'm introduced to all of my professors. You know what they introduced me as? This is the student from [ACCBD college], because that online degree completion program is so successful. They have a degree completion program. (AX2)

The online program delivery helped this very busy graduate who both works full time and takes night classes in a different program:

My experience was excellent. Here it was all online and I really liked that. I was working full time at the time filling in— I was working at my position and filling in for a friend of mine in hygiene. So it allowed me to do that, and I was also taking courses towards dental school. So I was taking those in the evenings— science prerequisites outside of the program and then I was able to complete those courses in the evenings as I needed to do them. (BX4)

He remarked that this was his first experience with online and that he really liked the diversity of students and faculty from different geographical locations:

I had always been a face-to-face person. I had never taken any online courses before, so that was definitely a different concept for me. Send an e-mail to someone when—I mean, not an e-mail but for coursework, my professor is in another state, and one of my classmates was out of state,

too, and her husband got stationed in Norway, so she was over there. So that was definitely different having one professor up here and classmates all over the place. So that was different as well. And I liked that, the diversity that that brought to the group. (BX4)

The online program exceeded this graduate's expectations. He was surprised that it would work so well, and he found that it made him more proficient, which was an unanticipated benefit that he could use in his workplace:

The experience was nice because I took most of the classes online. I thought I would have to go to a couple of courses, but it was right in line with my expectations that I can do it from home. Actually, one of the things that I found out is that online work takes time, but, actually, the amount of work that they give you is more than what you get in the regular environment. So I was surprised at that but I'm glad I had it. It made me more proficient. I find that I'm working in a similar type of industry. Everyone nowadays has to use a lot of Internet and online communications; so I see it as a plus that I had to do most of my work online. (BX5)

Another student identified convenience as a strength that factored into her decision: "*the convenience, being online. The weakness for some people is that it might be a little too—but I found it as a strength*" (BX6).

ACCBBD online programs seemed to have met—and in some cases exceeded—students' expectations. All of the online graduates, although in two different programs, were from the same site. Three of the graduates were currently in master's programs.

As this method of learning continues to grow, it was no surprise that the graduates in this study found online program delivery valuable—some even preferring it to face-to-face learning. Their reasons were many and they included: (a) convenience, (b) flexibility, (c) added ability to communicate online for work purposes, (d) ability to interact with a geographically diverse group of people, and finally, (e) one noted that it helped prepare for an online master's degree. No graduate had major concerns or issues

with online degree delivery. The next section will discuss an even more recent delivery method: interactive television.

Two-Way Interactive Television

One college in the study had several sites that were set up for two-way interactive television. Several graduates reported that they occasionally used this method; none reported any problem or issue with it. Of note, one graduate, who lived in a small town over 100 miles from the main campus, used it as a primary delivery method. This graduate indicated that using the two-way interactive television allowed her to complete her degree from her remote location *“because three quarters of my instructors were from there for the TV classes. They were just awesome. I think the program is wonderful and I’m really happy to see that they got the program”* (AX5). She also expressed overall satisfaction with the entire program:

I still look back, and I think as far as strengths, they’re just one of the strongest as far as their whole circle, you know, not breaking down from start to finish. I went to school for 6 years from start to finish, and I never really had any problems. (AX5)

Although clearly a viable delivery method, still, only one graduate utilized it as a primary mode. More investigation is thus warranted to fully assess its overall effectiveness.

Worksite Delivery

As was the case with the two-way interactive television method, again, only one graduate reported using worksite delivery of her ACCBD program. This graduate worked at a large institution that had partnered with the ACCBD college for the purpose of delivering classes at the worksite. The two institutions worked together to develop schedules that would work for the employees: *“They would adjust the schedule during the week, and on weekends, we were on site, on site. I thought, what other school would*

provide this for us?”(CX5). This graduate did not report any serious problems with the delivery of the program at the worksite. Yet, again, with only one graduate reporting worksite delivery, more research would need to be done to assess the effectiveness and viability of this teaching method before colleges or businesses considered offering this kind of an arrangement for an ACCBD degree.

Compressed Schedule (Including Summer)

The compressed schedule was much more widely used than the previous two learning methods, with seven graduates reporting utilizing this method of learning delivery as part of their ACCBD degree. Although these compressed classes were also offered in 4-week and 8-week courses, the most common length was 6 weeks (which was also noted by a few as being the preferred length), and in one program, all courses were compressed and offered over of period of 6 to 8 weeks. One graduate commented:

And I also really liked the 6-week format that we had. Most of the classes were between 6 and 8 weeks, depending on how many credits they were, and we just took one at a time. And I really enjoyed that format as well. It allowed more concentrated work. (BX4)

Another graduate concurred: *“Six weeks, right, right. I really like that. For some people that might be a weakness. I loved it”* (BX6). One graduate found the summer classes particularly helpful:

I took classes over the summer one year. I took two classes condensed—took 2 weeks of vacation and got two classes done in 3 weeks or something like that; five 4-hour days a week. Overall, it was pretty enjoyable. (AX3)

In addition to being able to take classes while on vacation or during a break from work, it was noted that this focus allowed for more concentrated work. Yet one graduate who was close to retirement and planned to graduate before she retired, stated: *“I don’t take summers off”* (BX7). From the experience of these graduates, one could conclude that

these compressed courses, some of which were offered over the summer months, were popular and a successful learning delivery method.

Scheduling Issues with the Lock Step Approach

Scheduling issues with regard to the lock step approach, when students are given a schedule for two years and expected to take all of the classes when offered, were noted by a number of students, each with a different issue or perspective. Two graduates from two different programs felt the lock step approach limited them from accelerating their program. Said one:

If you had something coming up where you might miss a class, then you just bumped your degree back 2 years. So it was very, very regimented. You really had to keep on it, and if you did poorly in a class and you didn't earn credit for that class, you were going to have to wait to repeat that class again, because it wouldn't be offered for 2 years.... And I think probably one of the other weaknesses was the gaps in between classes if you did miss one. Fortunately, I didn't miss any, but if I had, it could be very costly. (AX6)

Eager to complete her degree, the second graduate felt the lock step schedule held her back:

Yes, and I think that's [lock step] a detriment to some students that really could finish that program a little bit sooner than the time that they are allowing. Or because they have maybe three kids and a full-time job, they would rather have stretched it out over 2 and a half years instead of a year and a half, that kind of thing. So my experience of that: I think they could have been a little bit more flexible being that they still offer these courses consistently through the whole program because you've got the next class coming behind, taking these courses. So you've got that same instructor teaching two or three subjects. And it could have been easier for the student to say, "I would like to take three classes this module instead of two or whatever." So they lock you into their curriculum schedule and that's sort of not great. (BX2)

Other graduates generally felt the ACCBD programs were designed with a priority given to the graduates' needs. This was reflected in this comment: *"They really*

did their best to accommodate my schedule” (AX1), and this from a graduate in the same program: *“You know, the schedule here was good”* (AX3). In fact, one graduate stated that he was allowed to modify his schedule by taking an independent study when he missed a needed class:

They modify the schedules by semester depending on, number one, where the students are in the program, and number two, if it is more in-class taught or Internet based. You know, that kind of thing. The independent study helped, too, because I had one class that they just flat out didn't offer it in the fall time. [The instructor] said you will go to independent study. So they're very good at modifying and developing that. (AX4)

As was evident by the above quote and as the ACCBD programs were designed with the returning student in mind, flexible scheduling and scheduling around students' employment needs were a priority. In this study, 14 of the 18 graduates interviewed were older working adults.

Alternative Delivery Summary

Five alternative delivery methods have been identified and discussed above: night classes, online courses, two-way interactive television, worksite courses, and compressed delivery, all of which were designed to meet family and work obligations. Night classes were particularly popular, and graduates felt that they often met their needs to balance work and school. One employer advocated more night classes to accommodate those employees wanting to advance their skills. The online format also worked well for some graduates in balancing work and classes. In fact, some graduates were surprised at how well the online process worked and felt in some ways that they were better prepared for the new trend of digital delivery and online work. One graduate, who was about to commence an online master's program, felt the program had prepared her well. The graduate who lived in a remote location and who relied on the two-way interactive

television approach also felt particularly well served by the ACCBD program. A third graduate reported that the work site delivery was particularly effective in her case. Finally, compressed schedules with courses in 4-, 6-, and 8-week periods were noted by several graduates as allowing them to complete programs in a timely manner.

Theme 5: Relevant to Current Jobs

“Once I presented them with my degree, they converted me to full time, and I’m now the lead IT specialist here.” (AX5)

In response to the third question: How well did the ACCBD degree prepare you for work, the graduates interviewed overwhelmingly believed their jobs related to their ACCBD program in some way and that it had prepared them for work. This section describes graduates’ perceptions of how well their ACCBD program prepared them for work.

Graduates reported four primary areas that the ACCBD helped them with their jobs: (a) it prepared them for their first professional job, (b) it prepared them for a better job, (c) it led to an upgrade in their current job, and (d) it updated and upgraded their skills for their current job, as diagramed in Figure 5. Employers—who were asked similar questions about whether they would hire an ACCBD graduate and whether the degree prepared them for their work—echoed the graduates’ responses, that is, the ACCBD programs had prepared the graduates for the workforce. Graduate interviews took place mainly at the graduates’ worksite (14 of the 18); all seven employer interviews took place at the worksite.

First Professional Job Four graduates, all from the same site and all closer to the traditional student demographic (i.e., under the age of 25, no children, full-time student), reported that they felt that the ACCBD program helped them to obtain their first

professional job. Describing how her internship helped her with her first job, this graduate remarked:

I think it [ACCBD degree] prepared me very, very well because our program offered a practicum [internship]. That was one of our courses was a practicum course, and I actually did my practicum here; just a general networking. Some of my profs had connections with different organizations, and I did mine with one of my classmates here, and ultimately that, I think, got me a job here as a full-time employee because I learned the day-to-day activities, and I used what I learned in school to do those. It was just a great experience.... I just think it better prepared me for an actual job. (CX2)

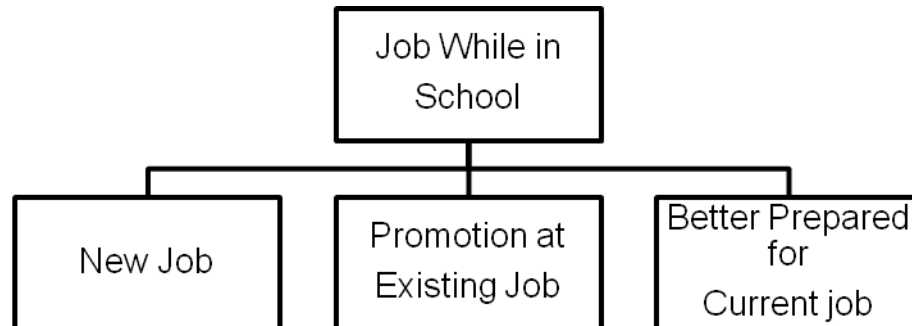


Figure 5. Theme 5: Benefit of ACCBD to employee/student.

While describing her ACCBD program, this graduate was able to pinpoint the class that helped her get her first professional job:

And a test-and-measures course really contributed to my ability to get this job because I could clearly demonstrate that not only did I take the class, but I did an applied project. We did a real scenario—a real live scenario, coming up with a real variable for like a real client. So I think having that sort of skill right out of university without having any real-life experience is really valuable to an employer because I have a product to show them. I had the theory to back it and then the references to back it as well. (CX3)

The graduate quoted below found that what he had learned in his ACCBD program was immediately applicable in addition to helping him obtain his first professional job:

I think still without a degree I would never be at my work where I am now. So the school, it taught me the principles of business management, of business analysis, stuff like that. So when you have a real-life situation, you can draw on those principles and then just relearn them, if you will, based on reality. (CX4)

Similarly, the graduate quoted next learned how to interact with business based on her real-world class work, which, in turn, helped her land her first professional job:

I knew that I needed to talk to the manager. So it was like pushing my way that way is what actually got me the job, not the online [application process]. So I think that knowing how businesses work, because we were working with them so closely, I think helped in the end. (CX1)

This group of younger graduates felt that the internships (also called practicums) and real-world interaction with businesses helped them land their first professional job. They credited their ACCBD program as getting them in the door. They also had some suggestions for improving ACCBD programs to better help students find jobs. For example, one said she would have liked to have known more about office norms:

I think that—like when you go to school, you can act and behave in a certain way, and you can dress in a certain way, and that's all fine. But when you get into a business and you get into a position, then it's—like I had to go out and buy a whole new wardrobe because you can't wear that type of thing in a business setting. It was like, what do I need? I feel like I was a little bit lost in that sense because I didn't really know what I needed to do, or how I needed to act, or what I needed to wear. (CX1)

This graduate described a gap between school and work:

But it doesn't give you really—as soon as you step into the real world, there's a learning curve. And that's with any university or college. It doesn't matter, but it was a distinct gap between schoolwork and work. (CX4)

Overall, these four younger, more traditional graduates perceived that their ACCBD degree had prepared them well for their first professional job. Of note, all four graduates all attended the same college, and it appears that this particular college was aware of their

need for more interaction with real-world business situations and so planned that into their curricula accordingly. Two of them remarked that, in fact, all of their courses had included some element of real-world business interaction, and they felt that, because of this practical interaction, their degrees, as differentiated from others, could be considered as applied degrees. The next section discusses the older graduates who are in the nontraditional category, albeit more likely to enroll in an ACCBD program.

Better Job

The nontraditional graduates (i.e., employed, with families, and typically, in their 30s or older) asserted that their ACCBD program had prepared them for a better job. A few with work experience had enrolled in the ACCBD program to upgrade their skills in hopes of finding a better job. The graduate quoted below had both work experience and management experience but nonetheless wanted to gain a solid foundation to build up her work skills:

So far I think it did a pretty good job of giving me a solid foundation to build on and to go into the workforce. I mean, I'm older than I guess what used to be the typical college student. Now they're getting a lot older. So I had already had previous work experience and management experience and that kind of stuff. But I think it just gives you a solid foundation. Then when you go into the workforce you kind of build on that. Of course, you have to tweak things depending on what you're doing, but it gives you just that base to build off of. So I think that's one of the strengths of it. (AX2)

In addition to feeling prepared for work, becoming an attorney was this graduate's specific career goal, and she felt the ACCBD program provided the degree she needed to be accepted into law school. Clearly, one could deduce that the ACCBD program helped this student prepare for a better job: *"So I was just doing what I had to do to get a bachelor's degree. That was my whole intent, so I could go to law school"* (AX1). In

response to the same question, another graduate simply stated: *“I feel I was very well prepared”* (AX1).

Switching careers was this next graduate’s goal. He already had an AAS degree in a very specialized technology field and decided he wanted to try something else. So he decided to pursue an ACCBD in business. He stated that after he had completed his AAS degree, *“and I started working out at [heavy industry] and I worked there a couple of years, I decided that I didn’t want to really work at the [heavy industry] for my entire life”* (AX6). And he was successful in finding a job outside of his previous industry:

I’m the only one with, I guess, a business degree in this department, so [I help out with] other issues like I help them do the hiring. I do the interviews and assist with that. Just general business sense, I think that the program [ACCBD] helped me quite a bit because not a lot of the people around here have a true understanding of business. (AX6)

At one of the college sites, four of the graduates in the same field said that they now had better jobs as a result of attaining their ACCBD degree. They all had the same AAS degree and an ACCBD degree in the same area. As a result of earning an ACCBD degree, this graduate was able to teach in a field where she had previously been a practitioner. She felt the ACCBD degree had prepared her well to make this change:

That bachelor’s program, as an educator, is excellent. It prepared me in every aspect of what I’m applying daily here. Every course I took, I see how it was totally related to what I’m doing in this field—whether it was my advanced ... course that I took or, if it was a course that we took in leadership, if it was my course in education, if it was my course in research. I am finding out that every course was designed to prepare me as an educator in the field. I don’t think I could have gotten that anywhere else. So I’m really happy that I chose that route and I did go to [ACCBD College]. (BX2)

Yet another graduate began teaching as a result of completing her ACCBD degree. She felt that the degree had prepared her well: *“Well, I think they prepared me pretty well*

because they covered teaching. They covered all aspects, you know, from ethics to leadership, to dealing with students. I think I was really prepared” (BX3). The graduate quoted below considered the capstone course in teaching to be particularly helpful:

I think one of the biggest strengths was the final course that we took, [which] was the capstone, which allowed us to design what we wanted to do with our degree. I did mine in teaching. And I prepared and taught two lectures for the [subject area] course with [instructor]. And I really enjoyed that. It kind of opened my eyes up a lot to the education realm. I never realized how much work was involved behind the scenes with education and the rewarding aspects of it as well. (BX4)

The fourth graduate in teaching, although concurring that the program had been helpful, also emphasized the importance of life experience: *“It’s definitely worth it. But I still think that students need their life experience, too, being out in private practice”* (BX6).

The graduates discussed above were all successful in attaining a better job as a result of earning their ACCBD, and they all perceived that the ACCBD program had appropriately prepared them for work, using phrases such as “excellent,” “rewarding,” and “really prepared.” One graduate specifically noted the capstone course as the key to preparing him for the work of teaching. This specific feedback may be helpful for schools considering an ACCBD program. Also colleges may want to consider the point taken by another graduate that experience was essential, perhaps requiring work experience in the field as a prerequisite to beginning an ACCBD program. The next section discusses the perceptions of graduates who remained at their same jobs and received an upgrade as a result of earning an ACCBD.

Upgrade in Current Job

Two graduates reported receiving an upgrade in their current job after completing their ACCBD program. One proffered with enthusiasm: *“Once I presented them with my*

degree, they converted me to full time, and I'm now the lead IT specialist here" (AX5).

The other graduate's degree also directly impacted her promotion. She noted, *"The degree, it helped me attain a better position within my job here, and the company paid for part of my tuition. So in that respect it was good"* (AX4). In both cases, the employers clearly supported the graduates, one even paying the tuition. The next section discusses graduates who felt the ACCBD helped to upgrade their skills in their current jobs.

Updating Skills

Four graduates had enrolled in the ACCBD program to upgrade their skills for their current job. A poignant example was a manager who had attained his associate degree over 20 years prior to enrolling in the ACCBD program. He contended that this new degree provided him needed computer skills to stay abreast of current technology and business practices:

Well, the management and technology made sense because I was pretty computer illiterate before I got into this [ACCBD]. You know, back in '86 you didn't really have the Internet.... I know they had spreadsheets and stuff back then, but I sure wasn't in a position where I needed to understand how they worked, all the points. It is just that's how everything is evolving. And if you've got employees that have more savvy, or you can't appreciate what they're doing, you know, you better stay with the times basically. (AX3)

He found that his enrollment in the ACCBD program was well timed as he was developing a new business plan at work:

I think it prepared me well because we went through creating a business plan for a company, and during this business plan, I was putting the things that I was working on [into practice] and working on those simultaneously for my final project and also in real life. It was making me think or rethink the things that I was doing at the time and see the big picture. Because when you are creating a product, you concentrate on one part of the issue, and then when you go to school, you find out that there are also a ton of other issues that you have to consider: a bigger environment, employees, how you have to pursue your customer, how you have to negotiate

contracts, many aspects of being in business. So that was very helpful.
(BX5)

Another graduate identified confidence on the job as the most important element that she had received from her ACCBD program:

It has helped me immensely. It really has. I've gained much more confidence and gained strong areas.... We deal with major planners every day. I work with a lot of numbers, so I've taken more math classes. Now I have a lot of mathematical skills that I really struggled with in the past.
(BX7)

The graduate quoted below noted how the program had changed the way she now viewed things, which impacted her practice. Our conversation took place in the context of change in the workplace, and she also indicated that she now feels better able to embrace the change in her industry:

I also recognized that with my colleagues—as much as I respect them—they are lacking in knowledge, skills, and abilities in certain areas. It was almost affirming, if I could put it that way, that all my hard work for 4 and a half years paid off because I see things differently and my practice has changed. (CX5)

Thus, in addition to updating technical skills, such as computer skills or developing an actual business plan, graduates also felt the ACCBD provided them nontechnical skills, such as confidence and the ability to appropriately deal with significant changes in the workplace. In short, then, all of these graduates who stayed with their past employers, although from different perspectives, perceived the ACCBD program had improved their skills. The responses from the employers' perspective (which for the most part confirm these graduates' perceptions) are covered below.

Summary of Themes Emerging from the Graduates' Perspectives

Five themes emerged from the graduates' perception:

1. *Mitigating Significant Barriers:* A number of significant barriers prevented the students from choosing more traditional degree programs, most of which were successfully addressed in the ACCBD program. Among these barriers were the need to maintain full-time employment, family obligations, and the inability to relocate.

2. *Relevant Programming:* Due to the students, who were mostly nontraditional (i.e., older and established with families and jobs), a number of requirements were needed to make it possible and compelling for them to participate in a degree program. Among these accommodations were: (a) smaller class size to allow for more individualized attention and greater access to faculty, (b) affordability as many students were supporting a family and had other financial obligations and constraints, (c) supportive and knowledgeable faculty, and (d) industry connection, assuring that the coursework was relevant to their current employment or career goals.

3. *Prepared for Graduate School:* One particular draw to the ACCBD program was that it adequately prepared the students for graduate or other professional schools as these graduates, overall, were motivated to excel in their chosen careers.

4. *Use of Alternative Delivery Methods:* Alternative delivery methods were needed in order for nontraditional students to be able to participate in the program. These delivery methods included: (a) night classes, (b) online instruction, (c) two-way interactive television, (d) worksite delivery, compressed coursework (i.e., given over a 4-, 6-, or 8-week period or during the summer months), (e) lock step approach, and lastly, (g) a hybrid of two or more of the above delivery methods.

5. *Relevant to Current Jobs:* The ACCBD program was relevant to their current jobs or career aspirations. These themes emerged as they were the most significant

factors that both allowed and attracted the graduates to the ACCBD program, and they provide evidence of the most important considerations to take into account when designing future ACCBD programs. The next major section discusses employers' perceptions of the ACCBD degree and confirms the graduates' perceptions regarding work skills attained from the ACCBD.

Themes 6 and 7: Employers' Perspectives

Research Question 2: How do employers view the applied baccalaureate when conferred by a community college?

This research question was designed to ascertain the familiarity of the employers with the degree as well as their general observation of their employees' capabilities after graduating from the program. Employer familiarity ranged from somewhat familiar to extremely familiar (which was the case with one of the employers who was also the director of an ACCBD program). Also one employer had previously worked at the ACCBD college and had hired multiple graduates and sponsored student internships. On the other end of the spectrum, two employers had little knowledge of the program other than the graduate who was working for them. Two themes emerged:

1. *Improved Skills*: The employers also believed that the program was valuable and the graduates had attained or improved their skills, and
2. *Community Building*: The employers perceived the ACCBD program as community building.

Theme #6: Employers Perceived Improved Skills

The employers perceived that the skills learned by the graduates in the ACCBD programs met, and in some cases, exceeded their expectations, and they discussed both technical and non-technical skills that the graduates had acquired in the program.

The employer quoted below remarked that her employees who graduated from an ACCBD program not only seemed more confident overall but were more independent and comfortable with taking the initiative and taking on a project as a result of earning an ACCBD:

And I think the other piece is just sort of a probably more indirect kind of quality is that they really have been instilled with that sort of self-starter attitude. Like the two students that—they are employees now, I guess, but the two former [ACCBD college] students that I've had really are willing to jump in and draft up a first go at things, whether it be a conference proposal or a report for an external partner—and just because I think they have some comfort coming out of their program about what that process looks like. So I find that there is an independence in those kinds of processes. (CY1)

A quality program was the perception that another employer had based on her experience with her graduate employee: *“I think just the positive experience that we’ve had with [graduate] has definitely made us feel that [school] is putting out some ... there’s some good quality there”* (AY2). She also felt, based on her own knowledge and experience with the graduate’s current position, that the ACCBD program had given the graduate the necessary technical skills for the job and continued: *“As far as the preparation for this position, let’s see. I think it probably gave her just the technical knowledge that she needed. I base that on experience.”* The employer quoted below based her opinion on a comparison to a graduate from a regional university:

We had somebody we just hired who went to (regional university), and then we have [graduate] who came out of [ACCBD college], and there’s

no difference in how well they do their job, I don't think. When I look back and see how [ACCBD graduate] started, because I trained [her], and our new person and how he worked out, how he started. I don't see any difference. (AY3)

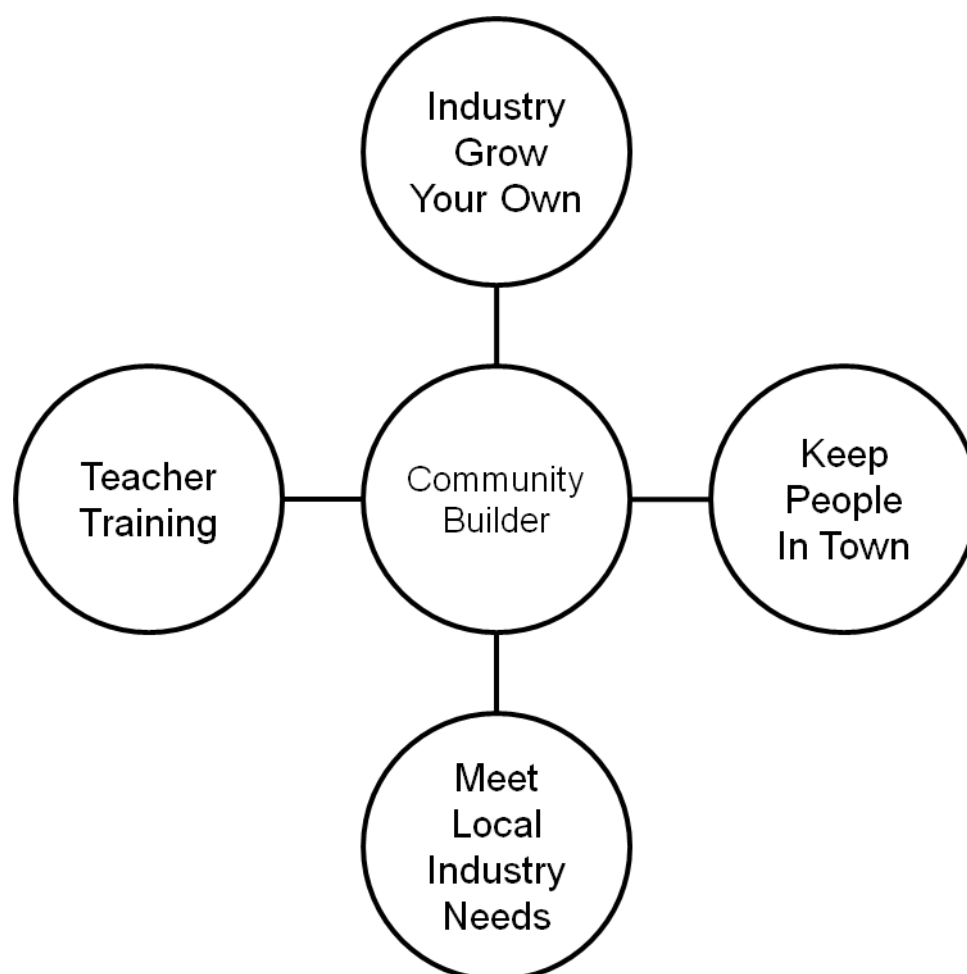


Figure 6. Themes 6 and 7: Benefit of ACCBD to employers.

Well prepared was the perception of the next employer quoted regarding his ACCBD graduate employee. In fact, he felt that she was even more advanced than what they had anticipated, and on her own initiative, eventually adjusted the position to utilize her capabilities:

She had all the tools that she needed to start the job. I think, actually, with that degree she is more qualified for a position that is even more advanced than what we gave her. I think we held her back, and she kind of kept that

to herself. And she actually grew the position to seat her degree more than what we gave her. You know, we kind of restricted her at the beginning because she came in, and you don't really know what her capabilities are. We could have started her way further along than we did. So as far as the degree goes, she was well prepared. It was our own ignorance that held her back. (BY1)

Nine out of 10 was how this employer rated the ACCBD program based on the fact that she had three employees from the program and knew the program director. In addition, she went on and said, *"I think it is a rigorous program. I think it's very challenging, very demanding. I think all the right things are offered to them that they take in their courses to be prepared"* (BY2). She also said:

They are well prepared. They have great training. I obviously know ... the person who is in charge of it, so I know the type of courses that she offers and the demands that she makes upon the students. I know it's a well-respected program within the [specialty area] community. (BY2)

The combination of nontechnical and technical skills was also confirmed by this employer, who also was the director of the ACCBD program:

Their strengths were a couple of things. They were able to communicate very effectively with the students. They were, I think, being recent graduates, they were compassionate and understanding to the students. They had just walked in their shoes. They came with—they had training or they had in their coursework, in their degree completion program, they had a course in educational foundations or educational concepts. So for me, as obviously an educator, that was a huge bonus. (BY3)

Another employer was equally enthusiastic about the ACCBD program, stating, *"It's a great program, and I think it does a great job of preparing people of all ages for improving their work ability, improving their ability to make a living. And it's just a good thing"* (AY1).

Employer perceptions in general tended to confirm the graduates' own perceptions that the ACCBD program had prepared them well for their respective careers

and job positions. Employers' perceptions also concurred with the graduates' that they had attained both technical (e.g., how to teach) and nontechnical or soft skills (e.g., showing compassion).

Theme 7: Employers Perceived Community Building

One employer stated that the program was, in effect, a benefit for the entire community, which was spoken in the context of recruiting employees in a small town. This was particularly significant in this area because many people had, in fact, left the town to attend college, never returning, and resulting in a "talent drain:"

I see a strength in what it does for the community to have those people coming out of that [ACCBD] program. A lot of them, like [graduate employee], her family lives here, so she's going to stay here and work. She's not going to immediately up and head someplace else to find a job. And that, I think, is a real advantage to the community.... I think having more people go through these programs [ACCBD] and get the education is going to ultimately be a benefit for the whole community. (AY1)

Similarly, rural communities also benefited from the ACCBD programs as noted by this employer whose employee was able to attain a bachelor's degree through the two-way interactive televised program: "Well, there are a lot of different strengths community-wise. It's an added bonus for our community to have the programs [ACCBD] available locally for folks, particularly in these rural communities (AY2)." The employer below noted that the local ACCBD college had succeeded in increasing the level of education in the community:

Like I said, I think we have a good college here.... My perception, when I first moved here 13 years ago, 14 years ago, people just weren't educated here. There were very few people who were educated. If you wanted a four-year degree, you had to leave to go somewhere else. So kids were being sent to other colleges out of the area. But since, you know, over the last couple of years I've seen that people have been staying—wanting to—because then they could [complete a bachelor's degree] here. (AY3)

Another employer, although from an urban area, had a similar reaction: *“It just makes sense to employ these folks that we have right here. It just makes sense. They have roots here. They live here. They’ve grown up here. They go to school here. Let’s put them in a job”* (BY1). Hiring locally was, indeed, a repeated theme:

So that’s another reason I would hire somebody from that program. Obviously, the proximity for us is good because the people that go to that program—I know it’s an online totally offered course, but the two people I know actually live here, you know, the two people that are working for me right now. (BX2)

The employer, who was also an ACCBD program director, as might be expected, had a particularly positive opinion of the program. She noted that she currently had three graduates on staff and stated: *“I absolutely would hire more because of all the strength that I said. They have such a good baseline”* (BY3). In this particular instance, she had hired these graduates to teach in the related two-year program. This was an excellent example of the “grow your own” model for developing community college faculty.

These employers all concurred that having the ACCBD in their community had a positive impact and clear advantages. Perceptions included the fact that the ACCBD college was a community builder, it kept people in town, and it provided industry with local talent to hire. In addition, in the instance of the ACCBD director/employer, she was able to hire graduates to teach in the two-year program, thus creating a “grow your own” faculty program.

Summary of Themes Emerging from the Employers Perspectives

Themes six and seven covered the employers' views of the ACCBD program.

Theme six described the employers' confirmation of graduates' perceptions that the ACCBD had prepared them for the workplace in two significant ways: improving technical skills, such as teaching and accounting, and improving or attaining nontechnical or so-called soft skills, such as learning how to show compassion and building confidence that would translate into initiating a project on their own.

Theme seven described employers' perceptions of the AACBD as a community building tool. That is, graduates would be more likely to stay in the area as opposed to seeking education elsewhere and not returning. An added attribute was that it raised the level of education in the community. Although one employer was unable to hire a local graduate because of office policy, all employers concurred that there were advantages to hiring local people. Overall, employer perceptions seemed to mirror the graduates' perceptions with no significant discrepancies between the two, and both groups had viewed the program positively.

Summary of Presentation of Findings

This chapter presented an overview of findings and a description of the three sites visited. The data collected from the interviews relating to each of the research questions were discussed and analyzed, and graduate responses were validated by the employers' interviews. A total of 18 graduates and seven employers were interviewed. The ACCBD graduates interviewed had completed programs that primarily fell into two general categories: human services and business.

The two research questions created a structure to investigate the ACCBD programs' strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of both the graduates and the employers of the graduates. Five themes emerged from the graduate interviews:

The ACCBD program:

1. Did not have the barriers to attaining a bachelor's degree that prevented them from attending a university;
2. Accommodated their needs better than that of a university in three important areas: smaller classes, appropriate faculty, and industry connection or relevance;
3. Adequately prepared them for additional education, including master's programs and law school;
4. Alternative delivery modes met, and in some cases, exceeded their expectations; and
5. Appropriately prepared them for their chosen fields and positions in the workforce.

Two major themes emerged from the employer interviews:

The ACCBD program:

1. Met, and in some cases, exceeded their expectations for worksite preparedness; and
2. Was a community builder.

Soundness of Data

A number of strategies were used to ensure the soundness of the data. They included memoranda writing, triangulation, and member checking, which are described below. At each site visit, I developed short memoranda to begin to identify themes, as

well as noting the demeanor of the participants and general notes and impressions about worksites where most of them were interviewed. Also, in addition, to recording the interviews, I used a hand held digital recording device to record my thoughts and impressions. Themes began to emerge as I began to analyze the data. Once all of the data were collected and transcribed, I reread through all of the transcripts and memoranda and then began a coding process of sorting the data by developing handwritten charts that revealed connections, which eventually led to the seven themes.

Member checking was also used to validate the seven themes. Five of the themes were developed out of the graduates' perceptions and two from the employers' perceptions. The member checking was conducted by calling the participants (both graduates and employers) and describing the themes I had identified in their particular area (as a graduate or an employer). Member checking was done with five employers and six graduates (two from each site). These follow-up phone conversations lasted 10-15 minutes. All graduates and employers contacted concurred with the themes that emerged as appropriately representing their views of the ACCBD. In this follow-up conversation, I also asked each participant if there was anything I had missed. They all responded that the themes I had identified in their area covered their views. I received comments like, "You nailed it," and "I think that sums it up nicely." Hence, the member-checking process confirmed that the themes were representative of employers and graduates alike with regard to the ACCBD.

In addition to the member checking and choosing the three sites from distinct geographic areas across North America, triangulation of the data was achieved through gathered documentation, college web sites, and discussions with the college

administrators at the three sites. Two different groups were used, graduates and employers, and each validated the other group's perspective. In addition, the colleges' web sites provided graduate profiles, including quotes from graduates that were very similar to what I had heard in my study.

A number of corroborating accounts from the College web sites (Kwantlen, 2009) and Great Basin College, 2009) quotes are offered below:

“[ACCBD college] is fantastic for helping build your confidence and giving you real-world experience” (i.e., validating themes 2 and 5).

Also validating themes 2 and 5, this graduate was quoted as saying: ” I was exposed to inspirational instructors, industry veterans, and the real design world through various practicum opportunities and industry events. For me, the small class sizes and one-to-one access to instructors were most beneficial”.

Said another graduate: “What makes this program unique in comparison to others is that it realistically prepares you for jobs in industry” (Theme 5).

This graduate's comments correspond with themes 1 and 2: “[ACCBD college] make everything affordable and convenient for their students. The school and the teachers really do care and they try to work around your schedule.”

Theme 4 fits this graduate's view of the ACCBD College: “I can take classes and not be stuck in one location.... For instance, I could be in Brazil and still be at [ACCBD college].”

Another graduate quoted clearly connected to theme 1: “There are no barriers at [ACCBD college], no limits on what you can do.”

In addition to these graduates' testimonials on the colleges' web sites, other documentation also corroborated themes. For example, one college had conducted a survey of regional universities asking if they would accept the ACCBD program into their master's program. Four of the universities had responded in the affirmative, thus providing corroboration to theme 3.

Within the study itself, theme 5 (graduates felt prepared for work) was corroborated by theme 6 (employers felt graduates were well prepared for work), and vice versa. With regard to employers' view, theme 7 (ACCBD builds community), I was able to member check with five out of the seven employers, and all five felt strongly about this theme, thus reinforcing its validity.

All of the above methods gave extra validity to the themes and provided sound presentation practice. To reiterate, they included (a) memoranda writing; (b) comparison of data across the three sites from three distinct regions; (c) utilization of two different groups (graduates and employers), thus receiving two different perspectives; (d) member checking; (e) documentation and web site reviews; and finally, (f) conversations with faculty and administrators at the different sites.

Chapter 5 will present the themes and discuss implications and suggestions for professional practice, as well as offering suggestions for future research in this area.

CHAPTER V

DICUSSION OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND PROPOSED THEORY

In this study, I interviewed both graduates and employers with regard to their experience and overall impressions of the relatively new applied community college baccalaureate degree (ACCBD). By examining their views, this study sought to better understand the attributes of the applied baccalaureate degree when conferred by community colleges. One of the goals of this study was to inform community colleges considering offering applied baccalaureate degrees of the strengths and weaknesses of the program, as well as providing additional information regarding graduate and employer perceptions that the colleges may wish to evaluate when considering an ACCBD.

There are five sections in this chapter: first, a discussion of the findings in the context of current literature organized by the seven themes identified in chapter IV; second, implications for policy and practice, third, the introduction of a new proposed process theory regarding ACCBD as a community builder; fourth, implications for future research; and finally, my own thoughts and conclusions on this subject.

Discussion of the Findings in the Context of the Current Literature

The review of related literature established that applied community college baccalaureate degrees were a rising trend in the community college arena. This section will discuss each of the seven themes identified in Chapter IV vis-à-vis the latest literature.

Theme 1: Mitigating Significant Barriers

The graduates in this study identified a number of significant barriers that would prevent them from pursuing a traditional baccalaureate degree offered at universities.

Primary among these was the sense of being “place bound” due to the responsibilities of work and family. Traveling long distances, attending daytime classes, relocating family, scheduling time for school, work, and family all presented barriers that often rendered students unable to attend a traditional university. The literature supported this finding. In fact, ACCBD programs evolved in many cases to create access for nontraditional students who were unable to attend a university. Bragg, Townsend, and Ruud (2008), in discussing community college two-year technical degree programs, explained that graduates have a difficult time finding higher education opportunities, “because many colleges and universities do not accommodate the complexity of their lives” (p. 3). State officials also concurred that it was difficult for nontraditional students to attend a university baccalaureate program, thus confirming the barriers identified in theme 1:

Adult and nontraditional students learners ... have unique circumstances that make attendance at a traditional baccalaureate degree-granting institution challenging, if not impossible.... [These] nontraditional students ... [tend to be] older than traditional college age, are working part- or full-time, and have family responsibilities that limit their ability to travel or relocate to attend college. (Bragg et al., 2008, pp. 6-7)

Two very recent studies mirrored the views of the graduates in this study with regard to the barriers associated with attending a university. Bommel, Floyd, and Bryan (2009) looked at the reasons students chose to attend a particular college, and they noted that it was in large part due to the location of the campus and the satellite campuses. Walker and Floyd (2005) also stressed the need for ACCBD programs, stating, “College programs need to be packaged and delivered in convenient formats to meet the needs of a diverse American workforce, ranging from 18-year-olds to aging baby boomers” (p. 92).

The ACCBD degrees were often designed for students who were working in the industry they were studying, hence, the convenience of attending a local community

college versus relocating or driving longer distances to a university. The ACCBD degree program took into consideration the hours the students were working and the fact that these students were usually older and had family commitments (Walker, 2005). Walker also described the societal implications of meeting the workforce needs of baccalaureate-educated employees and how community colleges reduced student barriers to baccalaureate attainment:

Insofar as community college students experience barriers which limit baccalaureate attainment, the opportunity for them to complete their baccalaureate at the community college could likely increase their income and their contributions to society. (p. 13)

The literature clearly supported theme 1 that community college applied bachelor degree programs significantly reduced the barriers that exist for nontraditional students (i.e., older and established with families and jobs) in traditional university settings. These degrees were designed to meet the needs of nontraditional students who have established lives with multiple commitments, including full-time jobs and family commitments.

Theme 2: Relevant Programming

Townsend, Bragg, and Ruud (2008) noted that there is very little data available as to how these programs run, stating, “We need more detailed information about how these programs work, what the key components are, and what are the characteristics of the learner they serve” (p. 14). In this study, the graduates identified a number of accommodations provided by the ACCBD program that made it possible for many of them to attain their degree. These accommodations included smaller class sizes, lower cost, more accessible faculty, and better industry connection. This study may, in fact, offer some of the first data in this area that directly responds to Townsend et al.’s assertion because the graduates interviewed based their views on direct experience with

regard to the accommodations and appropriately designed programs by the community college to meet their needs as nontraditional students.

ACCBD administrators have recognized that specific qualifications of the faculty (i.e., connected with the industry that they teach, accessible to the students, and familiar with nontraditional students' needs) factor into a student's decision to return to the college and enter into an ACCBD program (Bemmel, Floyd, and Byan, 2009). Walker (2005) contended that the strengths of a community college offering an ACCBD degree included "success among nontraditional or returning students through smaller classes, less rigid sequencing, and greater scheduling options" (p. 17). When comparing university and community college faculty, Skolnik (2005, p. 69) posed the following question:

Are there significant differences in the way that students experience an academic degree program in a community college compared to a university, even if the curriculum and credentials of faculty are roughly the same? Are there associated differences in student learning and retention between similar programs at the two types of institutions?

My study explored these questions from an ACCBD graduate's perspective. The nontraditional students who participated in this study preferred the smaller classes and personal attention from faculty associated with a community college over that of a traditional university setting. Furlong (2005) considered quality programming to be a key ingredient in a successful ACCBD program; quality was also noted as a concern of regional accreditation agencies responsible for an ACCBD program's adherence to baccalaureate standards. Furlong also suggested that programs tend to seek specialized accreditations to further ensure quality programming. Appropriate general education courses are also an importation consideration of regional accreditation body; however, in

my study, some graduates expressed frustration in being required to take classes that did not relate to their topic area. Consequently, it may behoove ACCBD programs to demonstrate the importance of general education classes, and if possible, show their link to societal and work connections.

Skolnik (2005) noted that there are concerns over the quality of the faculty credential associated with ACCBD programs in Canada: “I hear again and again expressions of concerns (or among a few hope) that the colleges’ new baccalaureate degrees will make the Ph.D. and research mandatory for instructors” (p. 65). Neither the graduates nor the employers in my study seemed seriously concerned about the academic competence of the faculty. Rather, they were more interested in the real-world experience that faculty could bring to the classroom. I would, therefore, recommend that community colleges consider work experience in the field as an important job qualification when hiring faculty for an ACCBD program. Similarly, potential students, accreditation agencies, and employers evaluating programs may wish to also consider the faculty’s work experience as an important indicator of program quality.

Based on the graduates interviewed in this study, it could be deduced that future students attending an ACCBD program would expect faculty to have the aforementioned qualifications, as well as smaller class size, lower cost, and better industry connection. Colleges considering offering an ACCBD program, as well as regional accreditation agencies, potential students, and interested employers, and universities considering accepting the program into their graduate program may also consider these attributes as of a quality program.

Theme 3: Prepared for Graduate School

Most of the graduates felt that the ACCBD had prepared them for additional education. Six of the 18 graduates reported that they had been accepted into graduate school, while several others were considering applying to graduate school, and one graduate had completed law school and had passed the bar exam. Although not the case in this study, some critics have suggested that the ACCBD is perhaps substandard and may not be accepted for admission to graduate programs (Townsend, 2005). One such critic is Walker and Floyd (2005), who wrote, “Given the difference between applied workforce baccalaureate and traditional baccalaureate degrees, an important question is whether the applied degrees would be recognized by universities for admission to graduate programs” (p. 101). In addition, Laden (2005) also expressed concerns about the ACCBD programs offered in Canada and their transferability to graduate school. Skolnik (2005) noted that, in British Columbia, there is a number of Canadian ACCBD degrees that were validated for graduation applications:

A common issue in discussion is access to graduate school. To date, eligibility of baccalaureate graduates to master’s programs seems to vary among provinces. BC university colleges developed their first baccalaureate programs in collaboration with universities, which initially offered the degrees. Thus, these degrees enabled admission to graduate study at those universities.... In professional fields, such as business and nursing, it seems quite possible for graduates to go on to master’s programs. (p. 65)

In other Canadian provinces, according to Skolnik, graduates with applied baccalaureates also had to take additional undergraduate courses to qualify for graduate school.

Skolnik posed an important question regarding the potential conflict between the applied aspect of the degree (e.g., preparation for the workforce) and preparation for graduate programs: “Is conflict inevitable between preparing students in applied

professional programs for the workforce and preparing them for further education?” (p. 69). This question was addressed in themes 3, 5, and 6 in this study. In theme 3, discussed here, graduates generally felt prepared for graduate school and other professional schools, with six currently enrolled in graduate programs and one law school graduate, as well as a number considering graduate school. In themes 5 and 6 (discussed below), graduates also felt the degree prepared them for their work, and their employers concurred (theme 6). Thus, I believe my study begins to inform the issue of graduate programs recognizing ACCBDs based on actual experience and provides evidence regarding some of these concerns about graduate school eligibility.

In fact, little research to date exists regarding whether universities are inclined to accept the ACCBD, and Townsend et al. (2008) have asserted that “studies need to be conducted on how the applied baccalaureate is perceived and received in the job market or in graduate programs” (p. 14). Of note, one of the sites that I visited had conducted its own survey of several major universities regarding a specific ACCBD program with the result that most would accept such a degree for admission to a master’s program. When St. Petersburg College launched its four-year degree, the school surveyed graduate schools in Florida to “assure that programs developed by St. Petersburg College would result in degrees that would transfer into graduate areas such as the Master’s of Business Administration, the Master’s of Science in Nursing, and other possible graduate degrees” (Furlong, 2005, p. 109). When developing the ACCBD program at South Seattle Community College, I also secured an agreement from one of the major universities (Washington State University) in the state assuring that students completing our ACCBD would be eligible for the school’s master’s programs. The other community colleges in

Washington State offering an ACCBD are currently securing similar agreements with universities to accept their ACCBD graduates. Although still in the process, their request has been favorably received from the universities.

Graduates in this current study generally felt prepared for additional education, and in all but one case, those applying to graduate programs were accepted. It was unclear, however, whether their acceptance into these schools was part of an agreement between the ACCBD school and the graduate school to steer the graduates to particular programs and particular schools in order to ensure better acceptance rates among the ACCBD graduates. Little research was available with regard to university requirements for acceptance of ACCBD graduates.

Theme 4: Use of Alternative Delivery Methods

All three of the ACCBD sites involved in this study offered some form of alternative delivery designed for nontraditional students. These alternative delivery methods included night classes, online and online/hybrid classes (i.e., a combination of classroom and online), interactive two-way television, compressed schedules and summer classes, flexible schedules, courses offered at worksites, and various combinations of the above. Graduates viewed these methods of delivery as meeting their needs, and in some cases, felt the alternative delivery method exceeded their expectation.

Of the three schools, these alternative methods were particularly pertinent for Great Basin College as the school is spread out over 60,000 square miles (Remington & Remington, 2005). Great Basin College, which was the first college in Nevada, is a leader in delivering curriculum in alternative methods. Remington and Remington noted, “Because of the nature of its service area, Great Basin College is the state’s forerunner in

delivering distance education, via the Internet, interactive video, and telecourses” (p. 139). Similarly, St. Petersburg College was the first two-year college in Florida and is also considered a leader in the state for serving a broad area via alternative methods (Furlong, 2005):

Both the State Board of Community Colleges’ master plan for postsecondary education developed by the Postsecondary Education Planning Commission recommended an increase in online education as one method to increase postsecondary access. St. Petersburg College embraced that initiative and indeed now ranks number one among the community colleges and universities in Florida, both in online courses and in online students enrolled. (p. 104)

Great Basin College and St. Petersburg College shared some interesting similarities. Both colleges were one of the first institutions of higher education of their type in their respective state and were also the first in their state to offer an ACCBD program. In addition, they are both leaders in their respective state in “distance” education.

A good example of a flexible program—as well as community support—the ACCBD in Technology Management at St. Petersburg College had strong support from corporate stakeholders, many of whom had employees attending the Technology Management program (Furlong, 2005). Furlong described below the flexible program that was designed for employees working at large corporations:

Since its inception the program is totally online as well as in a blended format. Courses are presented in a specific flexible semester approach of eight weeks (modmesters) to accommodate project managers working in the large corporations. The student demographic for this program is a 38-year-old employee, at an existing corporation working in an applied area seeking to enter St. Petersburg College. (p. 112)

In addition, Furlong noted that working students really preferred the flexibility associated with online coursework.

Walker and Floyd (2005) also addressed the importance of delivery in terms of offering the ACCBD to working students:

Methods of learning are as important as curriculum design and must also be effectively performed, not only because of employment, but of students' life-conditions. It must take place while a student carries out daily work and family obligations, in units and sequences compatible with the pace thus allowed. (p. 97)

Combining quality instruction in a mode that fit nontraditional students' complex lives was also a requirement for the ACCBD programs. Assessing the quality of the alternative delivery programs was something that graduates in my study felt met their needs. However, little literature existed to document the quality of ACCBD alternative delivery methods.

Currently, however, Townsend et al. (2008) are conducting research supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education to identify the adult learner's needs associated with the applied baccalaureate degree. Phase one of their study involved compiling a national inventory of methods, including the ACCBD, for adults to earn an applied baccalaureate degree. Phase two, which began in March 2009, is taking a closer look at key features of the programs. It is my hope that their study will provide new knowledge on alternative delivery methods associated with the ACCBD programs.

In addition to serving the students well, these alternative delivery methods also met the needs of the ACCBD college to deliver quality curriculum in a cost-effective model. As the newer methods (e.g., two-way interactive television, online courses, and worksite courses) continue to evolve and improve, colleges will likely continue to benefit from them by adapting and combining them. I believe there is a balance that must be met between technology and human interaction. I also believe human interaction will always

be a factor in good educational programs. However, the use of technology reduces travel time as well as other logistical time drains, and saves energy within the community, which is increasingly important in the current energy conservation economy.

All three sites in this study used alternative delivery methods. Two of the three were the first college in their state to offer online degrees. These online and other alternative delivery methods was a common element of ACCBD programs, which is responsive to the nontraditional students' needs, as evidenced by graduates from my study. However, the quality of these methods is still unclear and worth further investigation.

Theme 5: Relevant to Current Jobs

Graduates reported four primary areas in which the ACCBD helped them with their current jobs. It: (a) prepared them for their first professional job, (b) helped them to secure a better job, (c) led to an upgrade in their current job, and (d) updated and upgraded their skills for their current job. Graduates also felt that the ACCBD program provided needed workplace technical skills, such as computer skills, as well as nontechnical skills, such as confidence building. Although I was unable to find any literature regarding graduates' views on the preparation for a job that their ACCBD provided, I did, nonetheless, find literature that identified the need for this type of research and confirmed that it was at present sparse, at best.

To this point, phase two of Townsend et al.'s research will look for "evidence of ways the applied baccalaureate programs strengthen adult learners' opportunities to advance in employment" (2008, p. 14). I was able to find research that acknowledged the need for ACCBD programs to prepare students for work. Floyd (2005) proffered that one

of the primary reasons community college leaders are interested in adding the ACCBD to their existing programs was to provide better access for nontraditional students to attain bachelor degrees that provide higher quality jobs with more job security. To that end, two Canadian provinces, Alberta and Ontario, have used the ACCBD programs to meet industry needs instead of expanding access to typical traditional university degrees (Skolnik, 2005). Skolnik wrote: "Probably no jurisdictions in North America have gone as far as Alberta and Ontario in developing and implementing on a system wide basis the workforce baccalaureate catering to industry" (p. 68). Similarly, with regard to Florida, Furlong (2005) noted that one of the primary forces driving Florida to change its laws regarding ACCBD programs is the desire to help local citizens as well as develop a trained workforce for local industry, noting that "the Florida legislature began to explore the need to do something to increase this access for the good of local citizens as well as for the ability of local corporations to identify a trained workforce" (p. 103).

When describing the difference between ACCBD programs and traditional university degrees, Remington and Remington (2005) noted: "They are typically more flexible and less bureaucratic than universities [and] quicker to respond to the needs of students and employers" (p. 149). In addition, they considered the students to be the true benefactors: "The community college baccalaureate will help students, particularly nontraditional students, to realize their potential" (p. 149). I would submit that my study confirms this statement, especially considering that these ACCBD programs were developed primarily to provide the education students would need to acquire a better job. The fact that the graduates in this study view the ACCBD as helping them to reach their potential for life and work confirms that the ACCBD programs are, in fact, achieving this

goal. Finally, the employers' view that the ACCBD graduates are prepared for work (discussed next in theme 6) adds credibility to theme 5.

Theme 6: Employers Perceived Improved Skills

In theme 6, it was ascertained that employers also perceived that the ACCBD program had provided the graduates with enhanced skills that met, and in some cases exceeded, their expectations with regard to their employees who had successfully completed the program. These skills included both technical skills and nontechnical skills. In their current study, Townsend et al. (2008) are also evaluating the applied baccalaureate degrees vis-à-vis how they are received and perceived in the job market, for both community colleges and traditional colleges. They noted:

It is important to understand whether [the applied baccalaureate degrees'] future development may be crucial to increasing the number of adult learners with a baccalaureate degree, adults who are then prepared to fill positions in the workforce that require technical and professional level competencies. (p. 14)

I was unable to find literature regarding employers' views of the ACCBD programs; however, I was able to find literature regarding researchers' perceptions of what employers would consider valuable in an ACCBD degree. Walker and Floyd (2005) described the changing employment market as favorable for employers as they would be better served by employees with a combination of an associate and a bachelor degree, and preferably an applied bachelor degree. In addition, Walker and Floyd elaborated that the new globalization of the economy places a premium on highly skilled workers. The ACCBD, they concluded, is the next logical step for community colleges "meeting the growing demands by students and employers for a higher level of workforce-related knowledge and skills" (2005, p. 101).

I believe my study begins to answer the question posed by Skolnik: “How strong is demand by employers for applied graduates in technical fields and what are the longer-term career prospects for such graduates?” (2005, p. 70). As noted above, researchers believe that the ACCBD will meet the employers’ needs for skilled workers. Of the employers that I interviewed, it was clear that they viewed the ACCBD as giving the graduates the skill necessary to succeed in the workplace. One employer was so satisfied with the graduates she had hired that she was considering making the local ACCBD program a “preferred provider” source for potential new employees.

Employers’ views in general tended to confirm graduates’ perceptions that the ACCBD program had well prepared the graduates for work. Perceptions from employers also confirmed that graduates were attaining both technical skills (e.g., computer skills and teaching skills) and nontechnical skills (e.g., showing compassion and enhanced confidence). The validity of theme 6 was also supported by the graduates’ views in theme 5; that is, the graduates viewed the ACCBD as appropriately preparing them for work, which was substantiated by the employers who also shared this view.

Theme 7: Employers Perceived Community Building

In the employers’ views, having the ACCBD in their community was a clear advantage. Most importantly, the employers perceived the ACCBD program as a community builder in that it tends to keep people in the community and provides industry with local talent to hire. In addition, companies are able to “grow their own” as the ACCBD graduates in their employ had earned this degree specifically to move up in the company. Finally, local community colleges themselves, including ACCBD programs,

are able to hire graduates to teach in the two-year program, thus creating a “grow your own” faculty program as well.

There was significant research attesting to the ACCBD programs as community builders; however, I was unable to find literature specifically looking at this through the perspective of the employers.

The Truman Commission Report, written in 1947, was part of a major expansion of the educational services in the United States post-World War II. With regard to this report, Walker (2005) commented, “Nowhere does the report limit community colleges to two-year programs: open door access and responsiveness to community needs are to be their primary values” (p. 11).

A survey was conducted by the Community College Baccalaureate Association in which they queried community college presidents regarding issues associated with Community College Baccalaureate programs; 100 responded. Floyd commented, “Approximately a fourth had received requests from area employers to offer the baccalaureate in certain fields” (2005, p. 42). Walker and Floyd (2005) also viewed the ACCBD as a means to meet the local workforce’s needs, stating, “The concept of a workforce-related baccalaureate ties student learning and outcomes back to the economic or workforce conditions of a geographical area” (p. 97). As an example, they noted that potential ACCBD colleges in Texas were motivated by the needs of businesses near their campuses.

In a similar vein, Skolnik (2005) sought to compare the ACCBD with traditional degrees. He queried: “How do the contributions of applied baccalaureate programs to the local and national economy compare to those of traditional academic baccalaureate

programs?” (p. 70). Furlong (2005) yet provided more background for the support of ACCBD programs from the local corporations: “Corporate support has been very strong, with local organizations such as Raytheon, Raymond James, Franklin Templeton, and Transition Optical encouraging the college to start this [ACCBD] program” (p. 112). In addition, when describing partnerships between the ACCBD college and the local community, Furlong (2005) wrote, “The community college, which has established relationship with the community, in our opinion is the most appropriate avenue to increase baccalaureate production” (p. 105). These researchers have all emphasized the community service aspect of the community college. The findings from this current study support this idea from the employers’ viewpoint; that is, that these ACCBD programs help to build the community by providing skill upgrades for current employees, new skills for employees seeking new jobs, and developing qualified teachers for two-year community college programs.

Although both graduate and employer views of the ACCBD were predominantly positive in this study, some problems were mentioned. Some employers had very little knowledge of the ACCBD programs, and instead of responding to the program’s attributes, described the attributes of their employees. One graduate had concerns about the course sequencing, which limited the ability to take a fast track by taking additional classes. Another graduate also was not accepted into an advanced degree program and believed the university based its decision on the absence of a traditional bachelor degree. In a similar vein, at one site, both graduates and employers alike were concerned with the lack of prestige that the ACCBD college held in the community.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This section addresses policy and practice implications from the two research questions and the seven themes that emerged from the data. The implications associated with each of the themes may be useful for colleges, students, employers, and policymakers alike. First, these implications will inform colleges considering offering an ACCBD program. Second, they will inform employers considering hiring ACCBD graduates. Third, students considering entering an ACCBD program may be interested in these implications when selecting the college program appropriate for their needs. Fourth, universities considering matriculating ACCBD programs into master's level programs may also wish to consider these implications. Finally, accreditation agencies may wish to consider these implications when developing processes to evaluate these new hybrid-type colleges, which are essentially community colleges offering select four-year degrees.

Theme 1: Mitigating Significant Barriers

Community colleges have traditionally focused on serving the nontraditional student population by removing barriers that would otherwise prevent them from attending college. Nontraditional students tend to be older and more established in their lives than their younger, more traditional counterparts. Family and job considerations restricted them from participating in most traditional college programs. These issues were reported by the ACCBD graduates interviewed in my study, and there was general consensus among them that the ACCBD college had made the appropriate accommodations to meet their needs to integrate school into their busy and complicated lives. With regard to theme 1, considerations by the four groups (i.e., colleges, students, employers, and policymakers) may include the following:

- Community colleges are already charged with the task of reducing barriers that prevent nontraditional students from attending traditional schools; thus, they may wish to review their own track record in this regard when considering adding an ACCBD program.
- Potential students may wish to evaluate the college's ability to meet their needs to balance work, family, and school when selecting a college to attend.
- Employers may wish to consider recommending ACCBD programs that have the least impact on the employee's ability to continue to work.

Theme 2: Relevant Programming

Graduates' perceptions of the ACCBD programs when compared to a university's bachelor's degree program included the following: smaller class sizes, lower cost, faculty who are more accessible, better industry connection, and personalized advising. With regard to theme 2, the following would be the likely considerations of each of the four groups (i.e., colleges, students, employers, and policymakers) may be the following:

- Colleges considering offering an ACCBD may wish to consider hiring quality faculty with industry connections, as well as to consider class size, faculty accessibility, student costs, and curriculum with direct industry connection (some graduates in my study reported nearly every class had a direct industry component).
- Students considering attending an ACCBD program may wish to investigate the extent of faculty connections to industry and how the program curriculum is connected with industry, as well as average class size, program costs, and accessibility of faculty.

- Employers considering hiring graduates from an ACCBD program may wish to assess the college's interest in working with their company. In addition, employers may wish to consider the amount of real-world experience graduates are receiving from the curriculum and faculty.
- Policymakers may wish to focus primarily on the industry connection to the ACCBD programs as this is what most graduates in my study indicated as a positive aspect of the ACCBD.

Theme 3: Prepared for Graduate School

One third of the graduates interviewed in this study had already been accepted into a master's program, and another third were seriously considering one. My study has thus shown that ACCBD programs are, in fact, recognized by graduate schools, and as such, they do not mark the end of a graduate's educational endeavors.

With regard to theme 3, considerations by the three groups (i.e., colleges, students, and policymakers) may be the following:

- Colleges considering offering ACCBD programs may wish to consider working with regional and other appropriate universities to facilitate graduates' eligibility for master's programs.
- Students considering an ACCBD program may wish to investigate in advance the programs that would be accepted at the university graduate level, as well as which university programs and/or departments would accept the ACCBD and what criteria is used for admittance into these programs (e.g., grade point average, honors programs).

- Policymakers should consider that acceptance of these degrees by universities could be indicative of the quality of the program, or in the case of nonacceptance, of lack thereof.

Theme 4: Use of Alternative Delivery Methods

There are many alternative delivery methods, and they include night classes, online classes, interactive two-way television, compressed schedules and summer courses, flexible schedules, courses at worksites, hybrid, and in some cases, a combination of two or more methods. All graduates who used these alternative methods reported that, in most cases, they met their needs. Some students, reported difficulty with lock step programs and changing schedules. With regard to theme 4, most of the same points are covered under theme 1 in this section, with the exception of the following policy issue.

- Policymakers may wish to encourage innovation in program delivery that will help to meet the needs of quality and flexibility for nontraditional students for ACCBD programs.

Theme 5: Relevant to Current Jobs

The graduates in this study all concurred that the ACCBD programs had appropriately prepared them for work, thus giving them the appropriate technical and nontechnical skills to be successful in the workplace. With regard to theme 5, considerations by the three groups (i.e., colleges, students, and employers) may be the following:

- Colleges, students, and employers alike may wish to consider how ACCBD programs approach nontechnical skills for the workplace (e.g., critical thinking, confidence building, workplace etiquette, and job-seeking skills).

Theme 6: Employers Perceived Improved Skills

Theme 6 addressed employers' perceptions that graduates learned skills that were beneficial to them in the workplace. The implication for theme 5 regarding nontechnical skills also supports theme 6. Specifically with regard to theme 6, employers may have the following consideration:

- Employers may wish to work with ACCBD colleges to provide colleges with current real-world experience for students. This can be achieved in a number of ways, including providing part-time instructors, sponsoring real-world student projects, supporting student internships, and participating in college advisory committees, as well as other activities that would provide real-world experience.
- ACCBD colleges and related organizations nationwide, such as the Community College Baccalaureate Association, may wish to work cooperatively to develop strategies to inform employers and graduates about employment and education opportunities outside of the college service area to improve portability of the ACCBD programs.

Theme 7: Employers Perceived Community Building

The final theme identified is the importance of community building. In the next section, a theory is developed that is based on this study and proposes ways of building community. Implementing this theory and continuing to look for additional ways for community building will impact both policy and practice of colleges, employers,

students, and policymakers. This final theme culminates this study and unites all seven themes. With regard to theme 7, considerations by colleges would be the following:

- ACCBD colleges may wish to consider a role as a community builder and partner with employers and local community resources to establish community-building practices.

Many ACCBD colleges eventually morph into universities, seemingly losing their focus on the community college mission. This may be a result of the accreditation agencies policy that schools must choose between being either a two-year or a four-year institution with no possibility of an in-between status. Policy makers may want to consider adopting something similar to the Carnegie classification system of allowing a school to be categorized as “associate dominant”, with some bachelor’s degrees also being offered. Having a new classification may help colleges retain the comprehensive mission of the community colleges.

The following section presents the proposed theory of the ACCBD as a process for community building that has resulted from this current study. It is hoped that this theory will also inform policymakers and practitioners who are considering incorporating the baccalaureate program and allow them to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the ACCBD program. In addition, recommendations for further research, which follows, will also provide policymakers and practitioners with ideas for evaluating the effectiveness of ACCBD programs.

The Proposed Theory

The purpose of this theory is to make sense out of the common experiences of the study participants and provide others with a possible framework from which to plan,

operate, and evaluate the ACCBD program. This theory is grounded primarily on this present study and the views expressed by ACCBD graduates and employers of these graduates and my review of related literature. In addition, my own experience as a nontraditional student, a hiring manager, and a community college dean adds another dimension to the evidence supporting this theory and has provided a context for me to make the connections and understand the constraints in order to construct the theory. In addition, this theme was vetted by member checking with follow-up phone calls to nearly all of the employer study participants.

Charmaz (2006) described constructing grounded theory from a constructionist design perspective. That is, researchers will bring all of their experience to the study and make connections and understand constraints. Creswell (1998) described grounded theory's primary goal as exploring common experiences of individuals in order to develop a theory.

There are three components to the proposed process theory of the ACCBD as a community builder: (a) the demand by both students and employers in the local community for additional educational opportunities beyond two-year technical degrees; (b) the longstanding mission of the community college, which is to serve the educational and workforce needs of the local community, as well as to help students overcome barriers to higher education (e.g., the specific needs of the nontraditional student); and (c) the creation of a stronger community. Achieving community needs from within the community was a key theme discussed by McKee (2005) in regard to the ACCBD: "The goal of meeting community workforce needs were overarching themes throughout the development of this new program" (p. 132).

In fact, the first two components of the proposed theory provide the driving force for the creation of the applied baccalaureate degree programs. This is supported by Walker and Floyd (2005) who wrote, “Meeting the growing demands by students and employers for higher level workforce-related knowledge and skill is a logical next step for community colleges” (p. 101).

In my study, seven themes were identified. Five of these themes were based upon the graduates’ (mainly nontraditional students) views of the ACCBD, which they perceived to be the most viable option for them to earn a bachelor’s degree. This viability was based on a number of options that are not generally found in traditional four-year colleges. In fact, over half of the graduates in this study had attended a four-year college or university. These graduates identified accessible faculty and responsive alternative methods of delivery as important elements in opting for the ACCBD program as the best solution for their educational needs.

The remaining two themes were based on the employers’ views of the ACCBD as exceeding their expectations for their employees, as well as providing community building.

The community college mission, as described in chapter 2, is primarily focused around the educational needs of the local community and local workforce. As such, offering an ACCBD degree program is a straightforward response to the demands from local employers and students alike for additional educational offerings when universities are unable to provide degree programs for the specific needs of the nontraditional student who cannot commit to a traditional four-year college program. That is, by their mission, community colleges are designed to meet the demand for additional education within the

community. In this case, the educational need is for those with two-year technical degrees and the local industries that employ these people. The solution for the community college, in order to meet its mission, may be to consider offering an ACCBD.

This present study shows that when these two driving forces (demand of both students and employees and the mission of the community colleges) have been satisfied and an ACCBD program has been instated, the result is a stronger community. That is, when employers are able to hire local ACCBD graduates or promote employees who have been through the program, the program graduates are more likely to stay in the area. This in turn enhances the local businesses, and, in essence, gives back to the college and community. As a result, the entire community benefits and grows stronger.

As a process, the proposed theory—which is grounded in the present study findings and discussion of the findings in the context of related literature—has five identifiable stages (see Figure 7 below).

Stage 1. Local nontraditional graduates from two-year technical programs desire additional educational credentials to improve their work status. Graduates from my study who were mostly nontraditional students with two-year technical degrees, reported four primary areas in which the ACCBD helped them with their current jobs: (a) prepared them for their first professional job, (b) helped them to secure a better job, (c) led to an upgrade in their current job, and (d) updated and upgraded their skills for their current job. This indicates an existing demand to improve work skills from a nontraditional student population with two-year technical degrees.

ACCBD as a Community Builder Theory Process

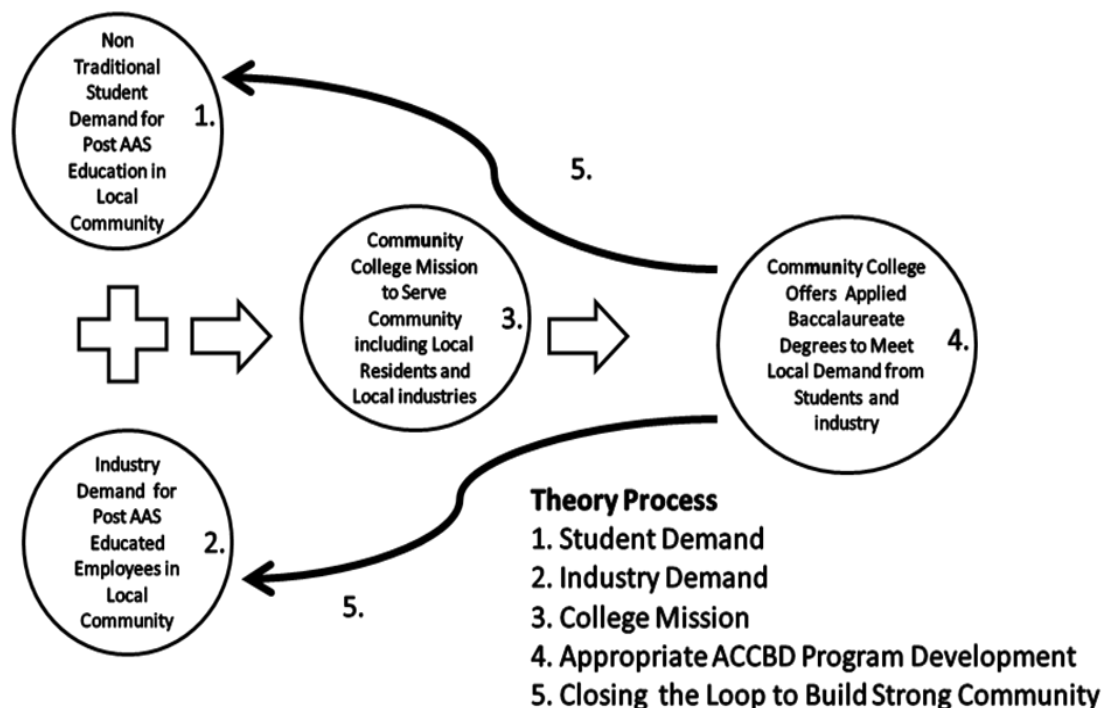


Figure 7. Proposed theory of ACCBD as community builder process.

Stage 2. Local businesses wish to hire appropriately educated local residents, and in some cases, would like to have their current employees' skills upgraded. In my study, theme 6 described employers' perceptions that graduates met and exceeded their expectations with regard to job skills. Theme 5, which was noted above, showed that graduates are often hoping to either secure a better job or improve their skills within their current company. This indicates that employers may already be using the ACCBD programs to hire new employees and upgrade current employees.

Stage 3. The mission statement of any local community college is to identify and rectify gaps, or opportunities, in its educational programs. As discussed in theme 1, ACCBD programs have evolved in many cases to create access for nontraditional

students who were unable to attend a university. Bragg, Townsend, and Ruud (2009), in discussing community college two-year technical degree programs, explained that graduates have a difficult time finding higher education opportunities, “because many colleges and universities do not accommodate the complexity of their lives” (p. 3). Graduates in my study in most cases felt that attending a university would not meet their needs for work, family, and school.

Stage 4. The community college then adapts and implements appropriate ACCBD programs to meet the demand. As noted in the discussions section of theme 2 in my study, the graduates identified a number of accommodations provided by the ACCBD program that made it possible for many of them to attain their baccalaureate degree. These accommodations included smaller class sizes, lower cost, more accessible faculty, and better industry connection. In addition, offering programs in the workforce area that prepared graduates for work, as noted above in stages 1 and 2, also supports appropriate ACCBD programming to meet student and employer demand.

Stage 5. Finally, the local community benefits. Local businesses are enhanced by hiring or promoting ACCBD graduates, and offering these programs within the community greatly reduces the risk of losing capable and well-trained graduates who might have otherwise left the community to be trained elsewhere. This supports the community in which they live and work. The employers in my study concurred that having the ACCBD in their community was an advantage. They perceived the ACCBD as a community builder in that it tended to keep people in the community, and it provided local industry with a better educated workforce to hire. As mentioned in the earlier discussions of theme 7, companies were able to “grow their own” as their employees who

had attained an ACCBD had done so specifically to move up in the company. Also, local community colleges themselves, including ACCBD programs, were able to hire graduates to teach in the two-year program, thus creating a “grow your own” faculty program as well. The implications of having people stay in their local community support my theory that the ACCBD is a community builder.

Implications for Future Research

As this theory is based on a relatively small group, more research with larger study groups will continue to hone in and identify strengths and weaknesses that will help this theory to evolve.

This study looked at the views of ACCBD graduates and employers of ACCBD graduates from three North American colleges. As the study was an interpretive study, it was not intended to make broad generalizations. The views of the graduates and employers did, however, provide a starting point for other researchers who may wish to explore these areas in the future. Each of the seven themes developed provides insight into this new trend of community colleges offering applied baccalaureate degrees and sets the stage for more research. Also, the Lumina Foundation is currently funding research in the area of applied baccalaureate degrees, including those offered at community colleges. It is hoped that the following suggestions will provide support and guidance for the ongoing research in this emerging area.

Evaluate Barriers

One area worthy of additional focus is the barriers that currently prevent nontraditional students with applied two-year degrees from pursuing a bachelor degree. Theme 1 from my study discussed nontraditional students who have family

commitments, work constraints, and often financial constraints that made attaining a bachelor degree from a traditional university a difficult, if not impossible, option. In addition, graduates noted that many universities do not offer applied baccalaureate degrees and were unwilling to accept credit from their two-year applied programs. Walker (2005) also noted that barriers could be a problem for community college students seeking a baccalaureate degree, noting, “Community college students experience barriers which limit baccalaureate attainment” (p. 13). A future study designed to evaluate the barriers of the nontraditional students with two-year applied degree would also help to identify many of the factors involved with students making decisions to transfer their applied two-year degree.

Determine Appropriate Programs

Graduates in this current study reported that the ACCBD colleges had appropriate programs, and they identified a number of positive attributes that included smaller classes, quality and accessible faculty, and better connection to industry. Developing a research study that would compare ACCBD programs with similar applied university programs would help clarify perceptions regarding ACCBD programs. Skolnik (2005) also described this issue as meriting more research: “Are there significant differences in the way that students experience an academic degree program in a community college compared to a university, even if the curriculum and credentials of faculty are the same?” (p. 69). Furlong (2005) suggested that a study should “examine the relationship between the community college baccalaureate and comparable programs in four-year institutions” (p. 126). Determining the appropriateness of these programs will inform ACCBD program supporters and critics alike in either advocating or discouraging programs with

policymakers. It would also provide potential students and employers with the ability to better analyze programs when making decisions, such as what school to attend or from which program to hire. Finally, existing ACCBD programs may draw from this data to help improve quality of offered programs.

Transferability of the ACCBD

The ability for ACCBD graduates to attend a graduate program is an area worth further consideration. In this study, graduates believed that their ACCBD program had prepared them for graduate school and other professional schools, and in fact, six graduates (one third of those interviewed) had continued on to graduate school. As noted in the discussions section of theme 3, little research exists regarding whether universities are inclined to accept the ACCBD, and Townsend et al. (2008) have put forth that “studies need to be conducted on how the applied baccalaureate is perceived and received in the job market or in graduate programs” (p. 14). As noted in the literature review, critics have raised the issue of transferability of the ACCBD degree. Walker and Floyd (2005) have also considered an important issue “whether the applied degrees would be recognized by universities for admission to graduate school” (p. 101).

A broad study that looks at how various graduate programs view community college applied undergraduate degrees as compared to university degrees would be helpful. In addition, studying the current ACCBD programs to quantify all formal and informal articulation agreements with graduate programs concerning their graduates would be valuable. Such information would help potential students, particularly those considering graduate school, to assess their chances for admission with an ACCBD

degree. Finally, this data would inform graduate schools unfamiliar with the ACCBD program how the degree is being viewed by peer institutions.

An additional study examining the curriculum from applied degrees at community colleges compared to the curriculum from similar applied degrees at universities would add insight to the accuracy of the current perceptions held by graduates in my study.

Support Systems and Alternative Delivery

The graduate participants in this study all agreed that the ACCBD alternative delivery methods allowed them to work around the restrictions placed on them due to work and family obligations. As discussed in theme 4, these alternative methods include night classes, online classes, two-way interactive television, compressed and flexible schedules, courses held at worksites, and summer classes, as well as some hybrid classes that combined two or more of these methods. Walker (2005) stated that “community colleges must develop new products and delivery systems” (p. 14).

Graduates from my study reported that the ACCBD colleges also have student support systems in place to help meet the needs of students using these alternative delivery systems. Alternative delivery was also one of the three themes found by McKee (2005) in the review of the Westark ACCBD program. Further, Remington and Remington (2005) described Great Basin College, also an ACCBD college, as one of the state’s forerunners in distance delivery. Furlong (2005) also described Florida’s community college system strategic plan as providing “an increase in online education as one method to increase postsecondary access” (p. 104). This study, which focused on the three colleges’ alternative delivery for ACCBD programs, and previous researchers all agree that additional research in this area would help to reinforce its success.

Delivery Models

One area of additional research would be the effectiveness of different delivery models. This may help ACCBD colleges select appropriate delivery models based on a number of factors, including the demographics of the student body, location, available technology, the type of educational material to be delivered, and partnerships with industry.

A second research area could be studies into the various options and efficacy of these alternative delivery systems and student support services for nontraditional students in ACCBD programs. This will be important for colleges developing these programs, for policymakers whose job it is to approve these programs, and for students who are contemplating attending an ACCBD program with alternative delivery methods.

Finally, an investigation into how some or all of these methods might be combined to deliver new hybrid models would be useful. Developing new alternative hybrid models based on the most recent technology would provide new delivery methods that could increase student learning, meet nontraditional students' needs around work and family, and meet colleges' cost constraints as well. Once developed, these new delivery methods could be replicated and delivered to ACCBD colleges and universities that are looking to provide more access for nontraditional students.

Implications for Work

One goal of ACCBD programs is to train graduates for higher-level work. This study found that graduates viewed the ACCBD as appropriately preparing them for work in four essential areas: (a) their first professional job, (b) a better job, (c) upgrade in their current job, and (d) update or upgrade of their skills for their current job. Skolnik (2005)

also asked: “How strong is the demand by employers for applied graduates in technical fields and what are the longer-term career prospects for such graduates?” (p. 70). The following discussion from theme 5 covers a set of important considerations. Skolnik wrote, “Probably no jurisdictions in North America have gone as far as Alberta and Ontario in developing and implementing on a system-wide basis the workforce baccalaureate catering to industry” (p. 68). Similarly, with regard to Florida, Furlong (2005) noted that one of the primary forces driving Florida to change its laws regarding ACCBD programs is the desire to help local citizens, as well as to develop a trained workforce for local industry, noting that “the Florida legislature began to explore the need to do something to increase this access for the good of local citizens as well as for the ability of local corporations to identify a trained workforce” (p. 103).

Research may be considered in the work-related areas for ACCBD graduates, including graduate earnings, promotions, job satisfaction, job attainment, and nontechnical skills, such as confidence building, leadership, and improved self-concept. In addition, a survey of employers regarding graduates’ contribution to the company, including both technical and nontechnical skills attained from the ACCBD program, would provide valuable feedback for future students and colleges planning to develop ACCBD programs.

Employers in this study also felt that the ACCBD programs appropriately prepared their graduates for their particular workplace. Of the employers that I interviewed, it appeared that they viewed the ACCBD as giving the graduates the skill necessary to succeed in the workplace. One employer was so satisfied with the graduates she had hired that she was considering making the local ACCBD program a “preferred

provider” source for potential new employees. Research into what kind of similar support employers might be willing to provide ACCBD students may help colleges develop programs and delivery methods that meet employer needs and foster partnerships with industry. For instance, would current employers be willing to (a) provide tuition assistance, (b) allow for either paid or unpaid time to attend classes/study, (c) offer a promotion or job upgrade upon graduation or even temporary promotions, (d) offer access to internal employee grooming programs, and (e) offer on-site classes through the ACCBD college and other similar programs? For nonemployees, would employers be willing to offer such services as: (a) internships, (b) scholarships, (c) access to equipment, (d) guest speakers, (e) mentoring programs, (f) loaned instructors, and (g) access to propriety information and other resources not normally available to nonemployees? Understanding an employer’s level of willingness to engage with an ACCBD college would allow a partnership between the college and the employer to be formed, as well as meeting the needs of the students, employers, college, and community.

Community Building

Beginning to understand the community-building effect of ACCBD programs may be the most important finding from this study as it was found that these programs were advantageous to employers, graduates, colleges, and the community at large. The theory that was developed as a result of my study is based on the premise that the ACCBD programs are community builders. This theory was developed from data gathered from my study. The discussion section of theme 7 described community support for the ACCBD, but I was not able to find any discussion in the literature for the ACCBD as a community builder. As such, certainly deeper understanding of the ACCBD’s

community-building ability would be one of the most important follow-up research opportunities. Some factors to review might include: (a) the number of people that choose to stay in the local community who might have otherwise left to obtain a degree and not come back, (b) improvements in local unemployment rates, (c) employer satisfaction surveys with ACCBD programs, (d) community policymakers' perceptions about the ACCBD programs, (e) review of ACCBD colleges' strategic plans for community-building activities, (f) interviews with faculty and staff regarding their perception of community building, and finally, (g) the perceptions of the graduates themselves. Identifying the key components of this phenomenon with the intent of replicating them with future ACCBD programs may help community colleges to provide an invigorated and stronger mission of building communities through education.

A further research consideration concerns the accreditation process for ACCBD programs. The current process for most community colleges planning to offer an ACCBD program is subject to a full review from their regional accreditation body. This review requires the community college to become a four-year school even if it is only offering one bachelor degree. For example, a college with 10,000 students may only have 50 students enrolled in 300- and 400-level classes. The college remains primarily a community college with a few select bachelor-level programs. Many colleges, once they have gone through the major accreditation process and achieved four-year status, morph into university-type institutions. Researching the possibility of regional accreditation agencies offering a status similar to the Carnegie Classification (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2009)—which is to remain primarily a two-year college with some baccalaureate degrees—may be warranted. This may help community colleges

retain their current identity as community colleges while also offering a few baccalaureate degrees to meet the needs of the local community.

The participants in this study, graduates and employers alike, based on their individual experiences, concurred that the ACCBD programs provided quality baccalaureate educational opportunities that had previously not been available to them. Employers experienced their ACCBD graduates as surpassing their expectations. Concerns from graduates and employers included feeling that the ACCBD had less prestige than their four-year counterparts. Some employers, although impressed by the graduates of the ACCBD programs had little knowledge of the actual programs. These findings may warrant additional research into the ACCBD programs in order to appropriately expand or not expand their offerings based on research.

One final research consideration would be to conduct a quantitative type study to evaluate the themes generated by my study. Examining perceptions in larger numbers from ACCBD graduates, employers of ACCBD graduates, and ACCBD colleges would help discern if the themes from my study would resonate with a larger sample group.

Final Thoughts

An ever-expanding American Dream: this is the legacy and promise of the community college system in America,.. It's a system based on the principle that we all have a stake in one another's success. Because when we invest in one another's dreams, communities benefit, our states benefit, and ultimately our entire nation is lifted up (Obama, 2007).

With the current worldwide economic downturn of 2008-2009, policymakers are looking for innovative ways to improve the economic conditions in North America. ACCBD programs may present a response to this critical need for innovation and new solutions as it provides community colleges with an additional tool to help revive local

communities while, at the same time, meeting the needs of the workforce and the population for offering post-two-year technical education.

The community-building component of the ACCBD programs—which resulted in the new proposed theory presented here—is an important finding. By offering these programs, community colleges seem to be fulfilling their mission statement by doing what they do best—serving the local community. In the last five years, the number of states offering the ACCBD has tripled from five to 15. Based on that statistic, I believe in 10 to 15 years, these programs will spread to at least half of the states. In fact, if not a definite trend by then, I believe those communities who have yet to establish these programs will, in essence, be “missing the boat” and missing an opportunity to serve and enrich their communities. Although not all educators agree that the next step for community colleges is to add the ACCBD program where appropriate, it appears to me, that as higher levels of education are needed to be a viable employee in today’s economy, it seems logical that the community colleges would increase the level of education offered and fill this need by offering ACCBD programs.

My study has identified common themes from all three schools surveyed (Great Basin College, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, and St. Petersburg College) that begin to validate the effectiveness of the ACCBD programs. It has shown that the ACCBD program has exceeded the expectations of both the employers and graduates who were interviewed for this study. I would encourage state and local policymakers, accreditation agencies, and other stakeholders to consider offering ACCBD programs as a potential option especially when universities are unable or unwilling to meet the demand. This study has identified research that would help them evaluate the appropriateness of the

ACCBD for their college. Further, they may wish to consider the themes and theory from my study to identify models that they may wish to investigate. I would like to close this study with a poem that has personal meaning for me, and seems to have a similar meaning to the quote that opened this section.

There is a destiny that makes us brothers,
No one goes his way alone;
All that we send into the lives of others,
Comes back into our own
(Edwin Markham, Unknown).

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