Opening Doors for Professional-Technical Graduates

Washington’s community and technical colleges believe every degree should lead to bigger and better things for students, whether it’s a well-paying career, a job promotion or step toward a higher degree-level. This commitment, along with increased degree requirements in certain professions, is at the heart of our applied bachelor’s degrees.

Building Upon an AA Degree

Applied bachelor’s degrees fill skill gaps in practical, market-driven fields where job requirements have advanced beyond the associate degree level.

Professional-technical (vocational) degrees — such as radiation technology — are considered “terminal” degrees, ones designed to teach students what they need to enter the workforce ready for jobs. That means if a student wants to continue their education, they have to start a brand new degree. Applied bachelor’s degrees turn that traditional model around, giving students the opportunity to take their hard-earned degree to the next level so they can advance in their career.

The degrees vary from a two-year management track on top of a two-year technical education, or a continuation of a professional-technical degree. Students build upon their already valuable two-year degrees to land higher-paying jobs and promotions, while employers get the additional skill sets they seek in bachelor’s degrees.

As one college president put it, “Applied bachelor’s degrees turn skilled frontline workers into managers.”

Positive Outcomes

Applied bachelor’s degrees arguably offer the best of both worlds: hands-on training in a career embedded within a four-year degree. Employers seek graduates because they have technical expertise combined with communication, computation, critical thinking and people-management skills.

• In 2019-2020, 6,628 students were enrolled in applied bachelor’s degree programs and courses at Washington community and technical colleges.¹

• In the first year after graduation, applied bachelor’s degree graduates had higher earnings than graduates of Washington’s regional public four-year universities who earned degrees in the same fields. Graduates of applied bachelor’s degree programs were also more likely to secure a job in their field.²
• The mean annual income of a graduate with an applied bachelor’s degree is, on average, 29 percent higher than a graduate in the same field who has an associate degree.³

Thirty of our 34 community and technical colleges currently offer applied bachelor’s degrees in fields such as radiation and imaging sciences; cybersecurity; data analytics; and advanced manufacturing and materials technology. For the most recent list, visit www.SBCTC.edu and search for “applied bachelor’s degrees.”

Diverse Graduates

Applied bachelor’s degree graduates are older than students in similar university programs; the average age is 32.⁴

Most graduates of applied bachelor’s degree programs earned professional-technical degrees at community or technical colleges, which enroll more low-income students, students of color, and students who are the first in their families to go to college. Because of this, applied bachelor’s degree graduates are also more racially diverse than students in similar university programs.

Rigor Matching Demand

Applied bachelor’s degrees not only serve students, but also businesses who are looking to hire or promote diverse and skilled workers who have both specialized skills and the more generalized knowledge of a bachelor’s degree.

For colleges, getting approval to offer applied bachelor’s degrees is a rigorous process. It requires an extensive review of employer demand, approval from the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges and new accreditation as a baccalaureate-granting institution from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. The proposed degree must align with the college’s mission and fill a need unmet by other colleges in the region.

Doing What We do Best

Applied bachelor’s degrees build on the strengths of the community and technical college system and fill local skills gaps. As the workforce changes with lightning speed and job demands outpace employees’ credentials, applied baccalaureate degrees at community and technical colleges help Washingtonians build skills for career advancement.

Sources:

