

4-year degrees at community colleges gain traction

By Alexei Koseff, Sacramento Bee

Driven by shifts in technology and educational expectations across industries, California's higher education leaders know they face an unexpected economic challenge just six years after the recession ravaged the state's workforce: a potential shortage by 2025 of 1 million bachelor's degrees.

As California's overburdened public universities consider ways to boost middling graduation rates, community colleges see an opportunity to step in and help close the gap.

Traditionally the domain of transfer and career technical education, community colleges are looking to offer bachelor's degrees in vocational fields, a step that could be the biggest adjustment to the mission of the state's three-segment system of public higher education since it was laid out more than 50 years ago in the California Master Plan for Higher Education.

"There's no way the state universities can absorb the ... demand or growth," said Constance Carroll, chancellor of the San Diego Community College District, adding, "In California, the time is right" to follow 21 other states that already offer baccalaureates at the community college level.

Hans Johnson, a researcher at the Public Policy Institute of California who first calculated the often-cited million-degree figure in 2009, said a confluence of factors has driven educational expectations higher and higher, including a shift toward more technically advanced industries in California and a growing sense that college-educated employees are more effective.

Research suggests "there's something about college itself that

leads to these gains," he said.

Johnson estimates that 40 percent of jobs will require a bachelor's degree within a decade, up from about a third now. Yet, unless the public universities that educate most Californians improve outcomes or accept more students, the state won't be able to meet that potential.

If SB 850 is signed, campuses, including Lake Tahoe Community College, will present applications to the California Community Colleges Board of Governors, then the selected degree programs will have to be accredited, said Vince Stewart, the system's vice chancellor of government relations, so it could be another year or two before any are established.

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