An idea whose time has come: Baccalaureate Degrees at Community Colleges

By Frank Gornick, Chancellor, West Hills Community College District

When it comes to innovation in higher education, California may find itself leading from behind again if it does not consider and implement the work of the State Task Force on the Community College Baccalaureate. In the past, when the California Higher Education system has failed to appropriately respond to issues of transfer and articulation, rational tuition increases, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and coordinated planning, the legislature has had to intervene.

Brice Harris of the California Community College system, Janet Napolitano of the University of California System, and Timothy White of the California State University System recently declared they will work together on implementing the California Master Plan for Higher Education for the benefit of California. The Baccalaureate Degree should be on the top of their list.

During the past decade in the U.S., almost half the states began to examine how their higher education systems responded to local and regional workforce demands for advanced education beyond an associate degree. Most of them now allow community colleges to award Baccalaureate Degrees.

Recently, the Chancellor’s office of the California Community College system commissioned a task force to examine the appropriateness of employing such a change in California. The task force’s work is completed and their report was just published.

Their findings reveal that more than 22 states already authorize such a degree, with little fiscal impact upon the existing budgets and neighboring universities. The reason for this success is that these states only allow colleges to award degrees that address documented shortages in the workforce. Some of the examples of degrees other states have authorized are in the fields of health, specifically registered nursing; elementary and secondary education; applied agriculture technology; and law enforcement. Community colleges who add these degrees do not become four year universities; their mission remains intact and enhanced.

California’s largest system of higher education, the community colleges, would welcome a constructive dialogue with our UC and CSU partners in higher education that will mutually benefit our citizens the state economy and our competitiveness in the world.

This innovative approach has provided another benefit to states that have regions similar to the San Joaquin Valley: access to a baccalaureate degree for underrepresented populations. The
West Hills Community College District enthusiastically supports the work of the state task force and looks forward to being among the first in the valley to offer these degrees to our citizens.

We ask the Governor, legislature and the three systems of higher education to work collaboratively with a goal towards implementing Baccalaureate Degrees at the community college.