

Published: 05.29.2005

4-year JC degrees no dead issue

Proponents say they'll be back with better shot

By Eric Swedlund
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Facing an enrollment surge in coming years and shortages in crucial job fields, the state university system is overwhelmed, say community college supporters who argue that one solution is allowing junior colleges to offer four-year degrees.

Proposals to do just that gained steam in the Legislature this year, but ultimately failed. Still, proponents say they'll be back next year with more support and better plans and insist that letting community colleges offer at least some four-year degrees is practical and necessary.

Community college officials say the schools could develop four-year programs in several key areas, keeping thousands of students from getting shut out or priced out of a college degree and quickly meeting educational demands for nurses, teachers, firefighters and police.

University officials, meanwhile, maintain there are no data showing a need for community colleges to provide four-year degrees. They say such proposals would have unintended consequences, destroying the two-year mission of community colleges. That could deny an effective entry point to higher education for low-income and non-traditional students, who often seek out the junior colleges first.

Both perspectives exist on the student front. Some go for the University of Arizona diploma for a higher-quality education and access to the resources of a top-level research school. Others say they would prefer a four-year degree from Pima Community College for the same reasons they chose the community college in the first place - lower tuition, smaller classes, better access to professors and greater flexibility in scheduling.

Four-year degrees at Pima would likely cost more than current tuition, and tuition is likely to rise at both the universities and community colleges. But under current levels, an in-state undergraduate student would pay \$17,576 over four years at the UA and \$5,216 over four years at Pima.

Lori Winkles, a 35-year-old early-childhood-education student, chose Pima for the lower tuition and convenience in getting classes. With two sons, 13 and 10, she needs the flexibility of night and weekend courses.

"With my schedule, Pima just seems to work out a lot better," said Winkles, who directs an after-school program at Sycamore Elementary School. "It would not work within my job and my family to go to the U of A."

Winkles has another semester to go at Pima and plans on getting her bachelor's degree. She said she'd jump at the chance to stay at Pima for another two years.

"It'll turn out to be the same for me as the university, the same quality," she said.

Legislation this year that included provisions for community colleges to offer four-year degrees passed the House of Representatives twice before dying in the Senate.

Enrollment comparisons

- Current public university enrollment in Arizona:

104,685

full-time equivalent

114,235

total head count

- Current community college enrollment in Arizona:

The debate won't go away, and more bills will be introduced next year, perhaps even as a referendum, said the bill's primary sponsor, Rep. Laura Knaperek, R-Tempe.

"The majority of people want this," she said. "There's a strong, strong sense out there as far as Arizonans wanting the ability to have more access to baccalaureate degrees and it's important we meet the needs of the state."

Problems with capacity are statewide, and community colleges could tailor four-year programs to meet the needs of their particular area, she said, not necessarily limiting the programs in statute.

"I just think we need a broader look, a more holistic look," Knaperek said. "The Legislature has taken on the responsibility of looking at the needs for higher education, not just the universities, not just community colleges, but the whole thing. It's about what Arizonans need in higher education."

Two-year institutions can be turned into "very robust" four-year colleges, said David A. Longanecker, executive director of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education in Boulder, Colo.

Two in particular he cited are Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo., and Boise State University, which has become the largest institution in Idaho. There are also a lot of examples of fairly mediocre schools, he said.

"I think you can accomplish that objective reasonably well," he said. "What you lose, almost absolutely, is the focus on what community colleges do best, which is to reach out to underserved students and provide valuable two-year technical programs."

Longanecker, a consultant hired by the Arizona Board of Regents to lead a redesign feasibility study, said historically there are very few examples of a two-year school retaining its core mission after adding four-year degree programs.

"The community colleges serve an absolutely critical role," he said. "That's what you lose and that's terribly important to a state like Arizona."

University officials contend the UA South branch campus and Northern Arizona University distance-education programs are enough to accommodate burgeoning student enrollment, ensuring qualified students university access, at lower tuition than on the main campuses.

"The University of Arizona is prepared to offer instruction to a much wider range of students than we are now being associated with," said Jerry Hogle, vice provost for instruction. "People forget we also have a branch that teaches all over Southern Arizona. We are more than interested in accommodating students, if we can't fit them here at UA South. We are gearing up for that and we have the structures in place."

Hogle said he questions where the community colleges are going to get the money necessary to ramp up their staff.

"The state has a hard time coming up with money to support higher-division education now," he said. "I worry that some community college districts may try to latch onto resources that ought to go to the universities. If they're willing to spend \$20 million on community colleges, why not us?"

Instead of offering bachelor's degrees in just nursing, education and fire and police science, Longanecker said a two-year institution would be more effective if it moved completely to a four-year college.

"I'd rather see them develop as a full-fledged four-year college than a half-baked four-year college," he said. "A community college with four highly focused programs will not accomplish any of the objectives."

Scott Stewart, a member of the Pima Community College District governing board, said the college can develop and sustain four-year degree programs in limited areas and he prefers the four disciplines outlined in the failed legislation - nursing, education, fire science and law enforcement.

"High tuition at the university is going to lock out a lot of people and if we can funnel those people to community colleges, they'll have at least some opportunity for higher education," he said.

Not getting legislation passed this year wasn't a catastrophe, but if the issue isn't resolved within a few years, the public will suffer, Stewart said.

"There's no crisis in capacity right now, but we can see it coming down the pipe," he said.

115,600

full-time equivalent

370,990

total head count

- Projected public university enrollment in Arizona in 2020

185,000

Sources: Arizona Board of Regents and Arizona Community College Association

- Contact reporter Eric Swedlund at 573-4115 or at eswedlund@azstarnet.com.

All content copyright © 1999-2005 AzStarNet, Arizona Daily Star and its wire services and suppliers and may not be republished without permission. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the expressed written consent of Arizona Daily Star or AzStarNet is prohibited.