

Chapter 85

A Tangled Knot of Career and Credential: The Associate in Applied Science Degree as Career Preparation and Transfer Catalyst

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we explore the potential of the Associate in Applied Science as both a terminal and a transfer degree. We first contextualize AAS degrees by examining their place in the development and missions of community colleges and their current purpose and prominence. We then review recent U.S. employment data and wage dividends for individuals with AAS degrees as well as those graduates with AAS plus baccalaureate degrees. Initially intended as a terminal credential leading directly to employment, a subset of students is likely to utilize the AAS degree for transfer and additional preparation leading to significant economic benefits and career mobility. We suggest that this phenomenon — presently understudied — is likely to increase in frequency as the United States becomes an increasingly credentialed society. Using North Carolina as an example, we document the state's workforce needs for AAS and AAS plus baccalaureate degrees and conclude by examining the implications for policy and practice created by the hidden transfer function of the AAS degree.

INTRODUCTION

When two-year colleges were first introduced in the United States, their purpose was ambiguous. They were variously depicted as extensions of the high school learning environment or mechanisms for providing entry into four-year colleges and universities. At times, they have been governed by local school districts, state systems of higher education, other higher education institutions, and as independent entities. This ambiguity has produced a complex governance environment that results in an equally complicated array of functions. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the veritable alphabet soup of certificates, diplomas, and degrees available to students—each of which is supposed to signify something slightly different.

Among these credentials, the Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degree has historically been considered a terminal degree or educational endpoint leading to jobs in specific vocational or technical fields. Nonetheless, for certain areas of study, additional economic benefits to both students and society may likely result from further study leading to baccalaureate degrees. This reality produces a tangled knot for students in AAS degree programs wishing to pursue additional education by transferring to a four-year college or university. AAS degrees, with strong emphasis on technical and professional education and limited general education components, do not articulate as easily with four-year degree programs as traditional community college transfer degrees. Moreover, state-to-state variations in academic policies and degree classifications, as well as inconsistent federal data tracking, further complicate the study and understanding of AAS degree programs and transfer pathways.

In this chapter, we begin the process of untangling the knot via a systematic review of what is presently known about AAS degrees. More specifically, we provide a discussion of important historical, societal, and economic trends. We use this information as the basis for an examination of economic outcomes associated with AAS degrees. These outcomes suggest more favorable results for those students who view the AAS degree as a prerequisite for transfer rather than a terminal credential. As a result of these broader trends, we explore the way that community colleges and state universities in North Carolina have repurposed the AAS degree in order to suggest ways that it can serve both those who will go on to four-year degrees (and perhaps beyond) and those who will not. Finally, we provide recommendations for future research designed to assist scholars in recognizing the complex reality of the AAS degree rather than merely its stated purpose.

BACKGROUND

In this section, we contextualize the AAS degree in broader historical and societal trends. This discussion makes it clear that, although the philosophical purpose of the AAS degree has always been clear, its practical purpose has been diffuse. This analysis is presented in four sections: 1) a discussion of community college history and the advent of associate degrees, including early efforts to distinguish four-year transfer from professional degrees; 2) an exploration of the transfer function of community colleges; 3) an examination of the prominence and purpose of the AAS degree; and 4) a discussion of recent trends in earned AAS degrees.

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