New bill great start to affordable bachelor’s degrees

Life would be a little easier for America’s young adults if they could earn a bachelor’s degree without the burden of thousands of dollars of debt.

Well, California might have found a way to ease the astronomical cost of a four-year college degree with a new bill authored by Sen. Marty Block, D-San Diego, and co-sponsored by Democratic Sen. Jerry Hill of San Mateo.

Senate Bill 850 authorizes a pilot program that would allow each community college in the state to offer one bachelor’s degree in an in-demand field, such as health care or information technology. We’d like to see the idea embraced and eventually expanded, as California will need an estimated 60,000 more college graduates every year to meet demand — a 40 percent increase over current levels, according to the Public Policy Institute of California. Lawmakers and educators need to make serious strides, and soon, to avert a potentially disastrous workforce shortage.

With Cabrillo College boasting at the seams with 17,000 students and several impacted programs, notably nursing and dental hygiene, the demand for more affordable higher education is obvious. Those students would be able to better position themselves for an advanced career soon after graduation if Cabrillo offered bachelor’s degrees with at least a few of its 70 academic programs.

Some 21 states already allow this because it helps communities meet the unique needs of local businesses, trains students for jobs that actually exist, and helps them avoid the costly and confusing transfer process. A community college in Bismarck, N.D., for example, offers a degree in energy management.

Reasonable as this seems, the proposal is controversial. It would increase competition with for-profit colleges, such as the University of Phoenix, for one thing. But the more substantive debate is over California’s 54-year-old Master Plan for Higher Education, which lays out specific roles for community colleges, the University of California and the California State University. Bachelor’s degrees are supposed to be the province of four-year colleges.

But this isn’t 1960; even the CSU system now offers dozens of doctoral degrees, contrary to the Master Plan. As Linda Thor, chancellor of the Foothill-De Anza Community College District and a longtime advocate of this cause, told us: “We have to be responsive to changing times.” Careers that once required only a high school diploma or a two-year degree now, or soon will, require a bachelor’s.

At De Anza College, Thor said, an example is automotive management. The school offers a two-year automotive tech degree, but dealerships increasingly want applicants with a bachelor’s, and Cerritos College in Norwalk is the only place in the state to offer it, through a partnership with a Michigan university.

Community colleges already work with local employers to train students with the right skills. They are ideally positioned to help California build its workforce in this way, while keeping costs low and allowing students to remain close to home — particularly in rural areas, which struggle to meet workforce demands.

The bill will need some changes, including more specifics about how the programs would be funded. We’d also like to see colleges be able to offer more than one degree.

The Master Plan for Higher Education has served the state well for five decades, and its central premise — an affordable, accessible education for all — should remain a guiding force. But in the 21st century, California has to think differently about how it can most effectively meet those goals.