California community colleges board approves 15 pilot bachelor’s degrees

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Bachelor’s degrees in mortuary work, ranch management and consumer technology design will soon be coming to California community colleges.

Under legislation signed last fall by Gov. Jerry Brown, the system’s governing board on Tuesday tentatively approved four-year degree programs at 15 community college campuses that will be introduced over the next three academic years.

“This is an historic day in our system,” California Community Colleges Chancellor Brice W. Harris said.

Changing technology and educational expectations have driven employers in fields such as dental hygiene, respiratory therapy and automotive technology – which once required only two-year associate degrees – to seek workers with a baccalaureate.

Advocates of community college bachelor’s degrees, which already are in place in 21 other states, have pushed for their introduction in California to generate up to an additional 1 million degrees in the state workforce by 2025. Senate Bill 850 allowed for up to 15 pilot degrees in majors not offered by the University of California or California State University, with the aim of meeting demand for highly trained workers in technical fields.

The community college system’s “core mission of job training means we have to change to four-year degrees,” Sen. Marty Block, D-San Diego, who authored SB 850, said at a news conference following the vote. “California should never be behind the curve, and now we are no longer behind the curve.”
A committee selected the 15 college programs from among “34 tremendously done proposals,” Harris said, considering labor market needs and the ability of colleges to deliver on their applications, as well as geographic, institutional and subject diversity.

The board will consider final approval for the plan in March, after consulting with UC and CSU. The pilot degrees must be carried out by the 2017-18 academic year and will sunset in 2022-23.

Following a vote of nine ayes and two abstentions, the audience at the meeting erupted in applause. Block and Constance Carroll, chancellor of the San Diego Community College District, who led the push for community college bachelor’s degrees in California, were honored by the board for their efforts.

“This is a game-changer,” Carroll said.

Board member Thomas Epstein praised the rapid turnaround on applications that were first solicited in November. “It’s rare that something this important gets done this quickly by government,” he said.