



Statewide Higher Education Advocacy Initiative

Draft Concept Paper

A STATEWIDE INITIATIVE - HIGH ASPIRATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Colorado has a critical need to educate, organize, and mobilize business and civic leaders to speak with one voice on the value of post-secondary education and the need for greater funding statewide. We need an orchestrated campaign to educate policy-makers and Colorado families to:

- Understand the urgent challenges facing higher education in Colorado;
- Combat misconceptions about higher education and its perceived value;
- Support policies that improve the higher education delivery model to make it more affordable, effective, equitable, and valuable to our economy and to our Colorado families; and
- Create and support a statewide network of higher education champions who advocate for higher education in Colorado.

THE RATIONALE - THE CURRENT STATE IS NOT SUSTAINABLE

The state's economic competitiveness is at stake. Experts believe 74 percent of Colorado's jobs will require at least some measure of postsecondary education. Yet, only 56 percent of Colorado adults have a degree or certificate from an institute of higher education. Colorado continues to struggle with the "Colorado Paradox," in which Colorado, one of the most highly educated states in the nation, imports a substantial number of graduates rather than graduating them. Colorado must invest in its own graduates if it wants to close its equity gap and produce a highly competitive workforce prepared for the jobs of tomorrow.

Colorado's current state funding, however, is inadequate to meet the needs of Colorado's future economy or its diverse population. In 2018, the money Colorado allocated for higher education spending per student placed it fourth from the bottom nationally.¹ A generation ago, Colorado paid for 70 percent of college costs and students and families paid 30 percent. Today, the reverse is true; students and families now pay nearly 75 percent of the cost while the state funds only a quarter.

Perception vs Reality - A Value Proposition Under Scrutiny:

The Perceived Value of a Degree: As the cost of higher education has exploded, forcing students and families to take on greater debt to pay for it, public perception of higher education has soured, and many parents and students question the value of a college education.

Awareness of Budget Cuts Lacking: As colleges fight to do more with less, most Americans do not realize the financial strains institutions face. The assumption is that tuition is increasing so surely the institutions have more money to spend. A study by American Public Media showed American adults are largely unaware of major funding cuts to higher education over the last 10 years, thereby exacerbating the deteriorating public perception of the "value of a degree".

Colorado IHEs More Competitive than Perception: Colorado produces its graduates at a lower cost to the taxpayer than any other state. Many Coloradans do not realize this. Colorado IHEs maintain competitive tuition costs when compared to other states, falling somewhere in the middle of the national pack. In a recent newsletter from CSU Chancellor Tony Frank, he writes that "student loan debt in Colorado has been on the

decline for several years, and recent state studies indicate that higher education remains a wise investment for our students”. Unfortunately, public and media perceptions are not aligned with this reality.

Student Support Measures for At-Risk Students Add Value but are Costly: The costliest tuition for any family or student is the college degree started but NOT completed. Students who begin but do not complete their degrees often face devastating, long-term financial impacts. Keeping at-risk students on track to graduation both addresses the equity gap and immediately increases the *value* of college enrollment for many families. However, the student supports proven most successful to help at-risk and first-generation students complete their college certificate or degree is time and labor intensive, thereby increasing the cost to the institution to actually graduate these students.

The Changing Face of the College Student: Another misconception is the changing face of the college student. Policy makers and even institutions themselves have not fully embraced the realities of our future college population – students are getting older and more diverse. Institutions may need to adapt their business models as they see adult learners return to campus and greater demand for workforce training.

And All this was True Pre-COVID-19: Institutions were facing all of the above realities prior to the devastating onset of COVID-19’s impacts on our institutions and their budgets. Arguably higher education now faces an existential crisis: the broad reliance on remote learning; greater desire for competency-based learning and differentiated instruction; workforce training demands; and what seems like insurmountable student debt encumbering the next generation of students. These will force communities and families to re-examine the role of our institutions of higher education in our communities, economies, and democracy. During previous economic recessions, many displaced workers headed back to school. However, with many campuses operating remotely, the draw back to campus may not be as strong during this downturn, which will further constrict the already tight budgets of IHEs.

BUILDING AND MOBILIZING A STATEWIDE HIGHER ED ADVOCACY NETWORK

K-12 has benefited from both formal and informal advocacy networks that policy makers have tapped into to advance the passage of bond initiatives, reform agendas, or even work to block unwanted policy changes. Although these same groups have occasionally caused “headaches” for administrations and school boards, they have helped protect K-12 funding overall and have kept K-12 top of mind for families and policy makers.

Higher education lacks that same informal network and would be well served if they helped build one.

Where to Begin - Tapping Existing Structures:

The effort to create a statewide coalition will begin with our existing Boards of Trustees across the state. The statewide coalition will be a collective effort approved by the Governing Boards themselves and created and maintained by their members. With the buy-in from their institutions’ executive leadership, this group is the natural focal point for the effort.

In total, there are currently around 100 board of trustee members and/or regents across the state, not counting the countless “alumni” whose terms have expired but who still hold a passion for higher education.

Although primarily focused on public institutions, the coalition will partner with private institutions that recognize the value of a strong public higher education ecosystem. All of Colorado’s institutions struggle against the many misconceptions about higher education, and they all can benefit from stronger statewide advocacy.

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS LEADERSHIP BUY-IN

For the statewide advocacy initiative to be successful, campus leadership across the state must be champions of this effort. The Commission of Higher Education, governing boards, and donors can be very effective advocates and will also be invited to participate in meaningful ways.

ONE STRONG VOICE | MAKE HIGHER EDUCATION A PRIORITY

The coalition will focus on initiatives that build the capacity and understanding of its members about best practices in higher education, the challenges facing higher education, and the overall need for greater financial investment. This group will only push for specific policy changes when broad consensus is reached. In addition, they will educate its members on what is happening both here in Colorado and nationally and will showcase innovative and successful initiatives.

STATEWIDE COALITION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION STRUCTURE

Higher Ed Advocacy Coalition: As we form this new entity, it is vital to get institutional buy-in and support from the various governing boards. However, the coalition will not be managed by the governing boards. Instead, the coalition will seek individual buy-in from current and former Trustees and Regents across the state. They will participate as individuals within the coalition and ideally will help “humanize” the face of higher education in Colorado within their broader communities. They might be tapped to represent the coalition at public meetings, including Chambers of Commerce, Rotaries, and other civic-minded community organizations. The coalition will provide communications expertise to effectively support this “speakers bureau”.

Executive Committee: The coalition will establish an executive committee. The executive committee will be composed of 5 – 11 members and will meet as needed. Their primary responsibility will be to develop a mission and focus for the coalition and potentially partner with the appropriate organization/non-profit who can assist in staffing the work of the coalition itself. They will maintain fiduciary oversight of any funds raised and spent on behalf of the group. The EC will reflect the diversity of the state, its composition of four- and two -year public institutions, and the need for urban and rural balance.

Governing Board Liaisons: Representatives will be recruited from each of the public IHEs in the state, including the Commission on Higher Education, and will be a liaison between the coalition and the institution’s governing body. They do not need to be the Chair of their Governing Board nor appointed in any formal capacity. They will be recruited by the coalition hopefully in partnership with the Governing Board itself. This group is an informal communications structure to help information flow.

OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVES AND BODY OF WORK

The coalition’s Executive Committee will ultimately be responsible for crafting a strategic and operational plan that may address some or all of the following objectives in various phase of its implementation:

- **Advocacy Coalition:** A communications plan to keep members informed and able to serve as effective advocates for higher education in Colorado:
 - The development of a localized speakers bureau that can help “humanize” the face of higher education in Colorado by assigning and supporting higher education champions to speak at civic organizations across the state; and

- A letter to the editor campaign and highly coordinated statewide editorial board strategy that advocates for a strong higher education ecosystem across Colorado.
- **Capacity Building and Support:** An outreach plan that supports trustees across the state in their responsibilities as they serve on higher education governing boards:
 - Host regular high-level briefings/convenings with national subject matter experts to highlight best practices and innovations nationally that help governing board members more effectively serve their institutions; and
 - Develop a new-trustee training manual that helps onboard new appointees and quickly immerses them in the responsibilities of serving on a governing board and develops their oversight capacity and understanding of higher education in general and fiduciary challenges and responsibilities specifically.

NEXT STEPS

Coalition founding members will continue to seek feedback and buy-in from the Chairs of Governing Boards and their Institutions in the development of this initiative. The Executive Committee will be formed and will quickly develop a strategic and operational plan to commence work as soon as possible. The goal is to move forward quickly and have the structure of the coalition built out prior to the 2021 legislative session. The Executive Committee will identify how best to staff the body of work necessary to fund and support the coalition. They will also coordinate with the Colorado Department of Higher Education and the Commission on Higher Education.

The coalition is committed to support a strong, robust, and thriving higher education ecosystem that serves Colorado's families, students, communities, economy, and democracy.

ⁱ Make No Mistake, The Bell Policy Center written by Amanda Valenta, February 2019