

Transforming Colorado: Higher Education and the Future of Our State

A Blueprint for Success

The Board of Governors of the
Colorado State University System

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Transforming Colorado: Higher Education and

The future of Colorado—its quality of life and economic prosperity—depends on the transforming potential of its colleges and universities.

One of the signal achievements of the United States in human history has been the provision of a community-supported education to all citizens, providing the fundamental skills needed to pursue an enhanced quality of life. John Adams famously wrote: “The education of a nation, instead of being confined to a few schools and universities for the instruction of the few, must become the national care and expense for the formation of the many.”

A well-conceived, appropriately funded system of higher education provides a vehicle for addressing some of our most complex societal challenges while assuring us continued economic competitiveness and prosperity. With leadership and vision—and an emphasis on measurable outcomes—Colorado’s system of higher education can become the state’s most effective vehicle for driving positive change. ***To do so, Colorado must seize the opportunity to link its aspirations for quality of life and economic growth with the transforming capacity of its colleges and universities.***

Colorado’s leaders—policymakers and the statewide business community—embrace a long-term vision for our state as a place that is economically strong, culturally rich, environmentally healthy and in which all citizens have the opportunity to pursue a fulfilling quality of life.

This is a vision shared by Colorado higher education leaders, who understand that our state’s long-term health depends on higher education’s ability to educate a skilled workforce, generate ideas that create and attract new industries and jobs, assure an educated citizenry that is fully enfranchised in the democratic political process and nurture a population with the knowledge and vision to sustain a healthy and progressive state for generations to come. And yet, in spite of this vision, circumstances have prevented Colorado from fully capitalizing on its historic investment in its colleges and universities, such that today Colorado higher education funding trails the average of college and university peers by more than \$832 million. While such funding limitations constrain Colorado higher education as a whole, some institutions and classes of institutions are disproportionately underfunded relative to peers.

Principles on Which Transformation is Based

Future investment in higher education can lead to a Colorado like that envisioned by its leaders. A vibrant system of higher education that will transform Colorado will demand a new public partnership between state government, institutions and the citizens of our state, founded on the following principles:

- Colorado’s economic vitality and overall quality of life are our main concerns, and they depend on the state’s placing high priority on higher education.
- A broad spectrum of accessible community colleges, quality state colleges and universities, and globally competitive research universities is an asset to Colorado.
- The skills and knowledge acquired through a college education are essential for nearly every job Colorado hopes to add to its economy.
- Graduates of Colorado’s colleges and universities must be prepared to compete in an increasingly complex and multicultural global marketplace, and they must represent all sectors of Colorado’s society.

the Future of Our State • *A Blueprint for Success*

- Colorado colleges and universities have primary responsibility for ensuring that P-12 teachers and principals are adequately prepared to educate the next generation of college students, and Colorado is committed to preparing all of its youth for its best universities and highest-skilled jobs.
- Robust support for university-based research and graduate education is essential for Colorado’s knowledge-based economy.
- Re-education and continued education of working adults through flexible and accessible means is the responsibility of Colorado’s public colleges and universities.
- Rapid commercialization of ideas, innovations and the products of research and scholarship plays a critical role in advancing Colorado by means of jobs and global competitiveness.
- Colorado is highly dependent on its colleges and universities to retain and capitalize on its potential in the 21st century.

The Focus of Higher Education’s Transforming Potential

Operating from the principles listed above, a blueprint for progress in the decade ahead may be constructed around Colorado higher education’s capacity to deliver:

- Transformation in K-12 education
- Transformation in labor quality
- Transformation in creation of businesses and jobs
- Transformation in global competitiveness
- Transformation in re-education opportunities for working adults
- Transformation in economic prosperity
- Transformation in overall quality of life

The Actions Ahead

Constructing and delivering on this design will require that the state undertake several progressive steps to counteract those forces that have historically limited higher education’s capacity to transform Colorado:

- achieve philosophical consensus between the Governor, Legislature, the business community and the citizens of Colorado on the importance of higher education to our economy and quality of life;
- recognize and address the fiscal constraints that have left Colorado institutions, most notably its research universities, significantly behind their peers in funding levels and the ability to compete for faculty and staff;
- reform the statewide higher-education funding system to more fairly fund economically important, high-cost programs in fields such as engineering, information technology, health care and the sciences;
- acknowledge the economic importance of graduate education and address the real costs of attracting and retaining top graduate students and faculty;
- commit to providing student aid resources that ensure all qualified Colorado students have access to educational opportunities and a reasonable promise of success.

A growing body of economic research makes a strong case for the transforming impact higher education can have on an economy. Economists Charles Jones and Paul Romer argue persuasively that it is the accumulation of human capital innovation—in the form of educational attainment—which, together with the generation of new ideas, drives a country’s economic growth.

On a regional level, a number of U.S. cities—both in economically thriving areas and in regions hit hard by plant closures and overseas competition—have recognized the value of building strong partnerships between business, government and higher education in support of economic development and prosperity. Recent work from the Kansas City Federal Reserve identified the role a doctoral degree-granting research university has on the prosperity of the region in which the institution resides. A recent study by professors Christopher Berry of the University of Chicago and Edward Glaeser of Harvard found that those “highly skilled” regions, where more than 25 percent of adults had college degrees in 1980, effectively became magnets for growth, attracting population at a much higher rate than areas where less than 10 percent of adults had a degree.

A college degree is also increasingly a distinguishing factor between those at either end of the income spectrum. According to the 2000 Census, the annual median income for college graduates ages 21-64 is 36% higher than that of high school graduates, and the 20 highest paying occupations noted in the Census all require a college degree.

It is clear, as well, that Colorado’s strongest industry sectors are looking to higher education to prepare workers who are up to the task intellectually and technologically. The Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce, in its 2006 “Business for a Competitive Colorado,” noted “. . . (T)here are 11 key industry sectors that are most critical to the expansion of our economy and job creation . . . Virtually all of these sectors require high levels of technological competency and skill.”

Colorado already enjoys a notable competitive advantage that provides a sound basis for emphasizing higher education as one of the state’s top priorities. The state boasts one of the most highly educated populations in the nation, with 34% of all adults in Colorado having obtained a bachelor’s degree. Colorado per capita income is the 8th highest in the nation—and the highest west of the Mississippi. Our public higher education system is particularly diverse, with a strong network of community and state colleges. Colorado is also home to three top-ranked major research universities that all boast particular strengths in the sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics—an exceptional foundation on which to build and sustain future, statewide economic prosperity.

The number of Colorado high-school graduates is expected to increase 21% over the next 10 years—one of the 5 highest anticipated growth rates in the nation. And 79% of all Colorado resident freshmen attend college in state. With the number of high-school graduates on the rise, Colorado has an opportunity to expand educational access and opportunity and further establish itself as a state that invests in a skilled and knowledgeable workforce.

To capitalize on existing strengths and better position Colorado as a globally competitive, dynamic and economically prosperous state, we must begin today to better position higher education as a transforming force in Colorado. To do so will require the leadership of the Governor and Legislature, in cooperation with the business community, in placing the health and vitality of Colorado higher education at the forefront of the state’s agenda in the decade ahead. ■